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ABSTRACT

In Australia, the Youth Allowance (a form of government income support) is being changed to require that most youth under 18 who receive it be engaged in full-time education or training. This change has positive and negative potential impacts on young people, schools, families, technical and further education, adult and community education, and community agencies. According to interviews with students, young people, teachers, and support workers (n=104), young people say they stay in school because of a general understanding that is what one does, a commitment to obtaining the deferred outcomes of education; a success in learning and its associated pleasure, family pressure, and the importance of social links. They talk about why they left school both in terms of a breakdown in the positive reasons for education, as a growth in the negative impact of school, contrasted with the positive alternatives that are perceived to exist outside school. Barriers are both systemic and specific to individual schools. Positive responses of education to these barriers have been proposed. Essential components of an appropriate education response are as follows: (1) development of core social and relational skills; (2) roles of real value for young people; and (3) appropriate and targeted skills. (Appendixes contain 52 references, 3 tables, and the instrument.) (YLB)

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Negotiating Staying and Returning

Young People's Perspectives on Schooling and the Youth Allowance

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Faculty of Education
The University of Melbourne

December 1998

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Part 1:

The Context of This Study

Introduction

This report explores the impact of the introduction of the Youth Allowance for young people aged 15 to 17 and those over 18 years. The objective of the report is to identify characteristics of the young people expected to return to or remain in education as a result of the changes. It will also identify the expectations of these young people and their preferred learning options and environments as well as implications for providers.

The report identifies and draws upon relevant national and international research and literature. The views expressed in the literature have then been tested against the views and experiences of likely Youth Allowance participants, service workers and schools through a series of focus groups and interviews undertaken in two metropolitan areas (Northern and Western Regions) and two rural areas (Gippsland and Barwon South Regions).

Background

The Commonwealth Government will introduce the Youth Allowance in July 1998 with January 1999 being the date that under 18 year olds will have to engage in full time education or training. It will replace unemployment benefits such as the Youth Training Allowance (YTA) for those under 18 years and Newstart allowances for those over 18 years. Young people under the age of 18 years will need to engage in full time study or training to be eligible for the Youth Allowance. This change in policy will impact on the range of educational and training programs that will be required to re-engage the Youth Allowance participants in full time study or training. It will also impact on those students who are presently at school but may have left school before the end of year 12.

It was expected that up to 6000 additional young people, with a wide range of educational needs, will be participating in education and training in Victoria.

There is a variety of sources which provide detailed descriptive indicators which might be used to identify the characteristics of likely Youth Allowance participants. Many of these participants are likely to be discouraged or disaffiliated school leavers and so have been influenced by similar factors to those that affect 'students at risk' and 'early school leavers'. These factors include: family and financial constraints, academic failure, boredom, truancy, alienating school environment, poor teacher/student relations and a school culture where the school is not responsive to the student's needs (Holden and Dwyer 1992: 15; Brooks, Milne, Paterson, Johansson and Hart 1997: 16; Batten and Russell 1995: 55). It is important to emphasise the diversity of the young people and therefore the need for successful strategies to cater to this diversity.

In 1992, the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training (1992: 37-38) commented on a 'sizeable group' for whom continued schooling was "at its best unhelpful" and warned that it could prove "counterproductive if it changes neutral feelings about learning into negative ones and leaves the young person with a wish never

to re-enter the training system at a future time". If the Youth Allowance initiative is to avoid this fate, it needs to be investigated in terms of its capacity to establish re-entry to education and training as a second chance opportunity, a prospect of recovery or an opening for re-engagement of the participants.

The Policy Background

Legislation to establish the Youth Allowance initiative proposed by the Federal Government has recently been passed by the Federal Parliament. The declared aim of the initiative is to meet the educational needs of the Australian economy and to combat problems relating to youth unemployment, with the Youth Allowance creating "real incentives to complete schooling or participate in training or other educational opportunities prior to work" (background briefing paper, DSS October 1997). The Youth Allowance is regarded by the Federal Government as an important social policy reform that is being initiated in response to "concerns expressed by young people, their families and the general community that the current arrangements are inefficient and treat young people in similar situations very differently, depending on whether they are students or unemployed" (ibid).

The Youth Allowance is "an income support payment for young Australians which integrates payments irrespective of whether they are in education, training, unemployed or sick" (ibid). It replaces five existing payments for young people:

- Austudy for students under 25 years of age;
- the Youth Training Allowance (YTA), Newstart Allowance (NSA) and Sickness Allowance (SA) for those under 21 years old; and
- payments above the minimum rate of family payment for secondary students aged 16-18 years.

The major change for those young people under the age of 18 who have previously received the Youth Training Allowance is that they will now have to be engaged in full time education or training in order to receive the Youth Allowance. This will come into effect as of the 1st of January 1999.

There are exemptions to this requirement, for example for young people who are homeless, suffering illness, unable to secure appropriate education or training, those who are refugees, those suffering from alcohol and drug abuse, those subject to a community service or juvenile justice order or those engaged in part-time work, training or a combination of these for not less than 20 hours per week.

There have been a number of amendments to the proposed legislation and these were supported by the Government in the Senate debate on the legislation (9-13 March 1998). One important amendment created an exemption category to allow for a case management approach for some young people. A further amendment exempts young people who last left school more than twelve months before the commencement of the Act from the provision of attending full time education or training. These significant changes, which affect both the **number** and **nature** of young people to be included, have now become part of the legislation.

The granting of exemptions would be implemented by the local or regional Centrelink provider, following guidelines developed by the Department of Social Security.

Full time education or training can include mainstream schools, alternative school settings, Technical and Further Education (TAFE), Adult Community Education (ACE) or JPET. Some of these settings only offer part time education or training which means that the young person would have to engage in education or training at more than one setting to qualify for full-time education or training. There will be a quarterly checks of attendance at the settings similar to the present checking system for Austudy.

Some Centrelink offices are planning to provide help to young people presently on the Youth Training Allowance to find full time education or training, including plans for young people to attend interviews three months prior to the 1st January 1999. Some offices will access links with the Salvation Army and educational institutions, to help provide suitable education or training. However, there will be no extra staff employed to help with this process.

In the past there has been a parental means test for those on Austudy for secondary and tertiary study, and for young people living at home under the age of 18, who are on the Youth Training Allowance. This parental means test will now extend to young people up until the age of 21 years if they are unemployed and to the age of 25 years if they are studying. "Consistent parental means testing will remove one of the major anomalies between existing support programs for young people. It will encourage parental support, ensure that young people in similar circumstances have similar entitlements and remove disincentives to study" (background briefing paper, October 1997).

Prior to the Youth Allowance being implemented, the Youth Training Allowance was paid directly to the young person. Austudy was paid to the parents of the recipient. With the new arrangements, the Youth Allowance will be paid to the parents until the recipient reaches 18 years.

Independent status will be granted to both unemployed young people and students who have been living out of the family home or who have been at home but working for the past eighteen months. The Youth Allowance independence criteria will make it far more difficult for unemployed young people to gain independent status; previously, unemployed young people could get independent status after thirteen weeks living away from home. On the other hand, the changes have made it easier for students who previously had to be independent for three out of the past four years. The implications for both young people and their families will be analysed further in this report.

Recipients over the age of 18 years, who have been unemployed for six months or have been on benefits from the 1st of January 1998 will be required to engage in an arrangement of 'mutual obligation' by undertaking additional activities. Those young people over the age of 18 who have been unemployed for longer than six months will not be subject to 'mutual obligation' requirements. Acceptable additional activities will include part-time work, voluntary work, education or training or participation in a government-funded program such as a literacy or numeracy program or a work for the dole scheme (DEETYA media release 28/1/98). This will then have an impact on the TAFE/ACE sector, particularly in the need for the provision of further programs or further places in existing programs.

Summary: The Policy Background

- To receive the Youth Allowance, young people under the age of 18 will have to be engaged in full time education or training from the 1st of January 1999. This applies if:

  - they left school post July 1997; and
  - their parents pass the income test.

- They will not have to return to full time education and training if they qualify for a number of temporary exemptions (granted by Centrelink). Some of these are:

  - homelessness;
  - illness;
  - unable to secure appropriate education or training;
  - drug and alcohol abuse;
  - engaged in case management.

- The Youth Allowance will be paid to the parents.

- Independent status to be granted after 18 months of work or living away from home.

- Youth Allowance recipients over the age of 18 years, who have been unemployed for six months or have been on benefits from the 1st of January 1998 will be required to undertake additional activities such as engagement in part-time work, voluntary work, education or training or participation in a government-funded program such as a literacy or numeracy program or a work for the dole scheme .

The Potential Impact

The proposed Youth Allowance changes to income support are among the most wide ranging seen for many years. The changes will impact on young people, their families, schools, other training institutions and the community service sector.

- ***Impact for Young People***

There are seen to be positive aspects to the combining of Austudy and Unemployment Benefits into a common allowance as an attempt to remove the disincentives for unemployed young people to return to study and for young people who have had to leave study due to the lack of financial support.

The support provided now includes the availability of rent assistance to young people who need to leave home to study. Previously rent assistance was available to unemployed young people but not to students. In the past, young people have commented that "in a

lot of ways it pays to be unemployed and on the dole than go back to school... if you're on homeless Austudy you still do not get a rental subsidy, which in effect means that if you go back to school, having been unemployed, you are $62 a fortnight less off." (White *et al*, 1997: 103)

The submission from the peak community youth sector body, the Australian Youth Policy and Action Coalition (AYPAC), to the Senate Community Affairs Committee noted that: "For young people leaving unemployment to pursue full time study, the amalgamation of Austudy with unemployment benefits makes the transition a much less complex process". The new legislation requires the young person to simply change activities within one program rather than shifting to a different program administered by a different department.

The concern for AYPAC and other social service organisations dealing with young people is that for 16 and 17 year olds the proposed legislation deals with the disincentive issue by limiting acceptable activities to only education and training. While AYPAC agreed that it is reasonable to require young people under the age of 18 to participate in a range of education, training and job seeking activities to improve their prospects of employment and be eligible for the Youth Allowance, it also argued that for young people who were unlikely to benefit from formal schooling, there should be alternatives made available and that these young people should not be penalised if these options were not available to them.

AYPAC recommended that a case management option be available to young people leaving education or training. At the first reading of the Bill in the Senate, this amendment was passed, and has now been supported by the Government and incorporated in the legislation. The emphasis of the case management provision is to move the young person towards education, training and employment through a combination of activities developed to address the specific needs and circumstances of the participant. It is argued that the case management model keeps young people in the system and prevents them from becoming marginalised and disenfranchised (AYPAC, 1997).

The method of payment of the Youth Allowance - to the parents of young people under 18 years - will also have an impact on some young people. This study's focus groups identified young people who rejected the need to return to or stay at school due to this financial incentive, as they felt that they would not see the money anyway. They claimed that their parents would not give them any of the money and would spend it on things that they (their parents) wanted.

- ***Impact for Schools***

"The Federal government is trying to get a clear message across to schools that schools need to be more responsive to students." (Harrington, 1998)

a) increased numbers

A consequence for schools of the introduction of the Youth Allowance will be that of increased numbers of students. All young people will have to **continue** in education until year 12 rather than leave and possibly receive an allowance to be engaged in Job Search activities. Further, other young people will have to **return** to full time education to continue receiving their Youth Allowance. While young people under the age of 18 who

have left education prior to July 1997 will not be required to return to full time education or training to receive the Youth Allowance, the prime focus in the operation of the changes will be on the **retention** of current school attenders, and on the **return** of more recent school leavers.

For the schools that will be most affected by the change in federal policy - those in areas with a large number of young people already on the Youth Training Allowance - there is a consequent concern about how they will cater for the specific subject needs of these young people when they do not know the actual numbers that may have to return to school. Whereas subject selection is often completed by schools in October, the young people returning to school may not enrol until the beginning of 1999 or may seek to enrol at various times throughout 1999 as they realise the consequences of the policy changes. If young people attempt to return, only to find that all relevant or popular subjects are full or even that the school is full, and they then have to approach other schools in the area, it further places personal and psychological barriers to the process of returning to education (focus group interviews, 1998).

b) early school leaving

For those that will have to continue in school, the complexity of factors that influence early school leaving will still be highly relevant. These have been described in terms of students' response to what they perceive as the unsatisfactory nature of the school culture, which is in turn characterised by three distinct [illegible]s that contribute to the alienation of some young people:

- a non-stimulating environment t[illegible] has no discernible relation to the wider community or the adult world to which the young person is beginning to gain access;
- the lack of support and referral to appropriate agencies for young people who are experiencing problems in their personal and academic lives;
- negative teacher/student relationships which are propped up by rules and regulations which disallow young people from expressing themselves as adult and responsible members of the school community (Holden and Dwyer 1992: 15).

These and other factors, that are elaborated upon in later sections of this report, confront schools as they address issues associated with the introduction of the Youth Allowance.

c) resourcing for welfare support

At the same time, it is claimed that the consequences of reduced government expenditure on public schooling has been forcing schools to "return to a basics approach to schooling" (Senator Allison, Hansard 12/3/98: 654). For example, the role of the Student Welfare Coordinator (SWC) has been reduced in many schools (Archdall, 1995). Support for the SWC and the links that SWCs are able to make with outside service agencies to assist students who may be having difficulty in remaining at school is also subsequently reduced.

Within this climate, the establishment of inter-agency links is an increasingly commonly used strategy within a range of school initiatives (Brooks et al, 1997: vii). While there has

by many schools to develop their interagency links to support their students. This has been enhanced by programs such as Extra Edge (funding for which has now ended, but with some regions continuing to fund a similar program coordinator). The Extra Edge model of a coordinator within school clusters has provided a model for the development of support in Victoria under the Suicide Prevention programs ('School Focused Youth Services') (James, 1997; James, 1998), and this may provide a possible systemic model within which Centrelink workers could then engage in finding the necessary placements for the young people returning to school.

In a similar approach, the Federal government is offering some extra funding to schools through its Full Service Schools initiative (Ellison, 1998). This will be around $7 million a year Australia-wide for three years. It will involve schools working together in clusters and will be based on a submission approach, but at this stage the associated process is still unclear. Funds are to be targeted to schools or areas of highest need, such as schools with a relatively high number of returning students. Schools may use the funding for a number of areas including:

- employing specialist teachers or counsellors;
- developing or delivering special courses in vocational education or literacy or numeracy;
- liaising with community agencies;
- professional development for teachers or other staff (ACEE, 1998).

However, schools are unsure about when the money will be available and whether it will be enough to provide for the unmet needs of students in order to allow them to return to or stay at school.

d) middle schooling

It is recognised that issues of school resistance, retention and early school leaving are not based solely within the senior years. There has been wide recognition that students' attitudes and orientations towards education are formed, in part, by their experiences within primary and junior secondary schools.

Therefore there has been wide attention, both in Australia and internationally, to the importance of the middle years of schooling and to the alienation that occurs for some students during these years, as well as to issues of transition from primary to secondary school. These issues also directly affect retention rates and are seen, in the longer term, to be vital to responses to the introduction of the Youth Allowance (ACSA, 1996). Aspects of the curriculum responses that need to be developed are not solely for 'a group of students' at the senior years, but equally apply to **all** students at **all** levels.

e) VCE

In the focus groups, students, teachers and service providers consistently identified the trend towards an increasingly academic curriculum as creating problems for some students who will be required to remain at or return to school. While Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs offer alternatives to and within the VCE in some schools, their current implementation still requires a substantial degree of literacy,

numeracy and organisational skills that some students do not have. For small rural schools there are, in addition, issues of size, availability of industry and access to training providers in order for schools to be able to offer students such alternatives.

The rigidity of centralised curriculum requirements and the lack of funding for students undertaking possible senior courses other than the VCE were also identified as issues for schools.

f) Community Based Learning

Cumming (1997) suggested that one of the alternative responses that schools may look at to respond to the unmet needs of returning and retaining students is the role of Community Based Learning (CBL). CBL involves building community-school partnerships to improve student learning and enhance community development. It covers a wide range of activities including employment, service, advocacy and research. It is underpinned by a number of basic principles that have been identified as necessary to re-engage young people with education:

- **Learner centred:** Students develop a sense of ownership with regard to the learning activity;
- **Outcome based:** the knowledge and skills that are developed by students and the means by which they are assessed are agreed by all the partners in advance;
- **Real Life:** the learning activity focuses on addressing a specific problem or issue;
- **Co-operative:** all partners are involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the learning activity (Cumming, 1997).

- *Impact for Families*

"The new arrangements will encourage families, to the extent that they are able, to support their children until they have achieved financial independence." (Youth Allowance Questions and Answers, DSS, 1998)

This policy change assumes that families are able to take more responsibility for the financial upbringing of their children for a longer period of time. The Youth Allowance will now be family means tested until the young person reaches 21 years if unemployed and 25 years if a student. For families who earn over this means tested income limit and whose children are unemployed or students, there is also no Family Allowance provided. This allowance stops at 18 years of age if the child is a student and at 16 years of age if unemployed. So while there are some allowances available for these families if the child is under the age of 18 years, and an independence tested allowance available for young people over the age of 21 years, there is nothing for these families with children aged 18 to 21 years (or to 25 years of age if a student).

It has been argued that such policy changes will negatively impact on rural families, as:

> funding decisions which are made on the basis of the broad picture can be especially inappropriate in particular rural settings... Changes to the Youth

> Allowance which make young people dependent on families for a longer period of time are especially punitive to young people and families in rural areas in which the added costs of transport, lack of employment and poverty make the costs of supporting young people even harder to bear. (Wyn, Stokes and Stafford 1997: 23)

The new arrangements assume that families, if they are economically able, will support their children. From the focus group interviews carried out in this study, it emerged that some families do not support their children other than providing for basic needs. One young person explained that "my mother and her husband are supposed to be supporting me, (but) just because I am living there doesn't mean they are supporting me. I have to pay for my own course at TAFE with no help from them whatsoever."

There are safety net clauses that allow for payments to young people in need but, as before, these are reliant on the judgement of a social worker at the Centrelink office who follows the guidelines set out by the Department of Social Security.

- *Impact for the TAFE Sector*

From this study's focus groups it appears that many young people over 16 years will look to the TAFE sector to provide them with an alternative to school. These young people perceive TAFE as providing more 'hands on' skills-based instruction in an environment that provided more adult relationships between teachers and students. On the other hand, service workers felt that while some young people would be able to take advantage of this environment, other young people would not have the necessary skills and level of commitment to successfully gain access to this area. TAFE was described in one region as "not wanting to be the dumping ground for young people who should be in school", with the implication that rigorous entry requirements may be put in place here. This would have implications both for the schools trying to transfer difficult students, and for the individual young people looking for an alternative.

There are clear implications for the TAFE sector both in potential increases in direct enrolments and as training providers as part of community-based training schemes. If the TAFE sector is to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse group of young people, substantial enhancement of bridging courses and basic skill training areas will be necessary.

Currently, there are age limits operating for enrolment in TAFE courses, with Colleges restricting access to those 18 years of age or older.

- *Impact for the Non School Education Sector*

The Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector could possibly gain substantially from these policy changes. The accepted underlying principles of the ACE sector are that it is:

- learner centred;
- has education at its core;
- is community based and driven;
- values and promotes diversity and
- is adaptive and responsive (McRae, 1998).

It is also community owned and managed, operates at a local level and so can, theoretically, respond appropriately at a local level to meet emergent needs.

The ACE sector already enrols a number of young unemployed people within the alternative courses that they offer. In general the courses are short (six weeks), part-time and are youth-specific, and are offered in a more flexible low key environment. The courses offered relate to a particular skill that the young person may want to attain such as a Driver Education course that allows young people to obtain their learners permit while improving literacy and numeracy skills at the same time. The courses have a small number of participants and offer a lot of one-to-one assistance from the tutor.

The ACE sector sees itself as offering a different service to that offered by the TAFE sector which also offers an alternative to those over 16 years from the school setting.

- ***Impact for Community Service Agencies***

With the incorporation into legislation of the amendment to allow for some young people to be exempted from provisions of the Youth Allowance requirements if involved in case management, there will be a strong role for the involvement of existing community agencies in advice, advocacy and guidance. Many such community agencies already take on this role for young people in ways that are directed, over time, at allowing and encouraging young people to return to school on their own terms. With an expansion of this role, and linking of these agencies with schools and Centrelink in regional areas, the agencies could play a vital role in maintaining students in school and assisting others to return.

Summary: The Potential Impact

Young people

- one single payment for unemployed young people and students that removes disincentives to study and makes transitions less complex;
- need for case management alternatives for those young people not able to return to full-time education or training;
- possible lack of individual financial incentives to study because the allowance is paid to the parents.

Schools

- increased numbers of students;
- concerns about catering for influx of students;
- alienation of some young people in response to the perceived unsatisfactory nature of the school culture;
- reduction in the resourcing of school welfare support;
- development of interagency links to support those remaining at or returning to school;
- importance of the middle school years in retaining students;
- the academic nature of the VCE;
- the role of VET, which could be an alternative for some students.

Families

- the degree to which families are able and willing to support children for longer periods of time;
- effect on rural families even greater.

TAFE Sector

- young people to look at the TAFE sector to provide alternatives to a school based education;
- age restrictions on access to the TAFE sector.

ACE Sector

- The adaptive and responsive ACE sector could lead to provision of alternatives for young people to school based education.

Community Sector

- role of community agencies to be involved with young people, and to liaise with schools to assist young people to return to and remain at school.

Part 2:

The Literature

A review of the literature examining factors which influence early school leaving and/or the barriers to returning to school, needs to be placed in a wider context. The question as to why some young people leave school early and do not return is not a new one for those in educational circles. The responses provided over the past decade are also not necessarily 'new' either. What does stand out is the need to place early leavers and potential returnees in a 1998 context in order to better understand their diverse needs.

In the past ten years, much has been written on early school leaving, with many recommendations for reducing this increasing problem. Recently the discussion has shifted to focus on the question of 'whose problem is it?' Initially, the literature documents approaches in which the student has been blamed: early school leaving is essentially the 'fault' of the student who has failed, rather than the 'fault' of the school or the impact of other factors on young people's lives (eg lack of family support or homelessness). The term 'at risk' became commonplace in educational circles when referring to young people. This term has generally been associated with young people 'beset by particular difficulties and disadvantages', those "who are thought likely to fail to achieve the development in their adolescent years that would provide a sound basis for a satisfying and fulfilling adult life" (Batten and Russell, 1995: 1).

Increasingly the discussion has become inclusive of structural and external factors and the impact of these on a young person's ability to stay on at or return to school. There has been a shift away from the position of 'individualising' the young person's experience of failure (and thus taking on a remedial response which involves 'fixing' the student), to focusing upon changes to the structural circumstances of young people. Simultaneously, there is mounting support from current material to challenge the existence of a 'typical' school leaver (Holden and Dwyer, 1992; Batten and Russell, 1995; Dwyer, 1996a and b).

Dwyer (1996b) in his article, **What do we know about the non-attenders?** begins his work from two assumptions:

- the interest in this topic stems from a concern to improve the experience and success of young Australians within the settings of institutional learnings;

- there is no typical school leaver and that "young people dislike, disengage from and even leave school for a variety of reasons, at different stages in their schooling, with different attitudes towards education and different prospects for future careers" (Dwyer 1996b: 47).

Batten and Russell concur, suggesting that

> it is indeed very difficult to define relationships between risk factors and educational outcomes with any precision because the relationships are highly complex and ultimately not known. One thing is clear, however, the concept of single cause and effect relationships in this area is nonsense. Even the

general paradigm involving several intervening variables is an oversimplification. Relationships need to be viewed as forming a dense and complex web of interrelated, interacting, multidirectional forces." (1995: 54) (see also Appendix 1)

Hayduk and Webber (1995), Dwyer (1996 a & b), Hixson and Tinzmann (1996) and Batten and Russell (1995) take this point further suggesting that what comes with the outdated understanding of 'a typical early school leaver' is the need to challenge the belief that the 'blame' for early school leaving or not returning rests fairly and squarely with the young person. They attack the idea that one can develop 'lists' of characteristics of young people which, in the right combination, are said to describe the 'typical early school leaver'. These lists tend to focus on what is seen as wrong with the young person, for example: low self esteem, poor literacy skills, a history of truanting and violence in the school, or as being academically weak. Presenting the issue in this way, they say, not only places the young person completely 'at fault', but also encourages attitudes such as: "Well what can we do? If they're not at school every day or even once a week, how are we supposed to make a difference?" in which no person or institution takes responsibility for the 'problem'.

Hixson and Tinzmann (1996) argue that while the 'at risk' material has tended to blame the student for failing at school, or for school performance over which they often have little control, "too many educators have become satisfied with not reaching certain students" and that this situation is unacceptable. Such individual 'blame approaches' deny the structural and external factors which influence a young person's capacity to be successful at school. They argue that it is more appropriate to start from a position of asking "what are the 'unmet needs' of these young people?" In this way, there is a broader understanding introduced that may lead to questions such as: what can the government do? what can schools do? what can teachers do? what can service providers do? what can the parents do? as well as what can the young person do?

In a similar vein Batten and Russell (1995) point out that teachers in general are not keen on insisting on full retention. Such an approach does not seek to shift 'blame' to the teacher or to the individual school, but to broaden the discussion on why it is that young people leave school early and do not want to return. An acknowledgment that teachers already have large classes, high curriculum demands and a pressure to achieve 'outcomes' begins to reveal some of the other complex issues involved.

Holden puts this issue in context: "with an increased interest in retention rates, the young people who are on the edge of the schooling system are forgotten in the rush to cater for those who will finish their secondary education" (1993: 21).

It is also important to acknowledge the changing demands which young people now face. The current context of schooling is now quite different to that of ten years ago. Dwyer (1996b) talks about the impact on young people of the changing expectations of participation and completion. The legal leaving age in particular is now not seen as the 'end of schooling'. Dwyer talks about the difficulties young people can frequently experience during the middle years of schooling; yet there is now an expectation that young people not only survive these potentially difficult middle years but desire to continue and complete the end of year 12. To make this transition more successful, Dwyer (1996b) believes greater attention and resources need to be paid to these middle years of schooling (see also Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996).

The current economic context has an impact on the capacity of schools to cater for the unmet needs of young people. The implementation of Schools of the Future Program in Victoria has changed the way schools respond to the needs of their clientele. The report: **Early School Leavers in the Dandenong Region** (Dandenong Regional Youth Committee, 1995), presents arguments about the impact of global budgeting and competition between neighbouring schools. One of the expected results from this new competition was pressure to increase student enrolments. While in country areas this has been the case, Melbourne suburban school principals are generally careful to balance the quest for overall student numbers with a focus on getting the 'right sort of student' - who will present positive images of the school, and who will produce positive 'educational outcomes'. Archdall (1995) argues that schools do not want to be seen as catering for the more 'needy' students as they will then be termed a 'welfare' school; parents who want an academically rigorous curriculum will move their students to a school which does not have such a 'welfare' label. Being perceived as a school that cares for the 'welfare' of students may then result in a lowered perception of it being able to provide a quality education, and thus increase the danger of forced closure because of falling numbers (Stokes and Tyler, 1997). The message is clear: individual schools which attempt to cater for the welfare needs of their students do so at the 'risk' of being labelled. Within a stringent economic climate for schools, Hayduk and Webber (1995) argue that the ability of schools to cater for the multifaceted needs of young people is extremely limited.

The **Early School Leavers in the Dandenong Region** Report (Dandenong Regional Youth Committee, 1995) also emphasises the power that Principals now have to remove students from school, either by suspension or expulsion. It is argued that Principals are not being given incentives to accept students who do not provide assured 'outcomes'; there may then be some hesitation in finding a place for such a student in their school. For students, they say, there is an expectation that they will 'shop around' and find a school which will give them a place; however, when they are rejected from schools which are 'full', they often give up the search.

While it is inappropriate to present a simple list of the defining characteristics of early school leavers, the literature does introduce some common themes or tendencies which may help for the identification of programs to assist in this area. In reviewing the literature to that point, the Youth Research Centre (1990) identified the following factors as influencing early school leaving:

- **the type of school system:** the vast majority of early school leavers have a government school background;
- **gender:** more young men than women leave school early;
- **ethnicity:** koori students are the most seriously disadvantaged of all school leavers;
- **regional differences:** rural areas have higher levels of early school leaving;
- **socio-economic status:** low income is predominantly linked with early school leaving;
- **change of locality, residential insecurity:** especially homelessness;
- **early and chronic truanting:** a clear indicator of early school leaving;
- **family expectations of schooling** (although this has declined as a factor since the mid 80s).

The work done by the Youth Research Centre from this report (1990), through the Early School Leavers Longitudinal Study (1991-1994) to the summary provided by Dwyer (1996a) is still the most current and comprehensive source of information informing the debate around the issue of early school leaving and the difficulties young people face when returning to school. The three year longitudinal study tracked 132 early school leavers from three Victorian regions to provide insight into and understanding of why students left school, their experiences out of school, the barriers experienced when some tried to return to education, and possible resolutions to the issues.

The research identified the following types of Early School Leavers with the emphasis on challenging the notion that there is a 'typical school leaver' (summary from Dwyer 1996a: 12):

Positive leavers:

Those who leave early to take up employment or an apprenticeship; in general a positive experience for the young person.

Opportune leavers:

These 'leavers' take the opportunity to leave in the hope that they may get employment even though they have generally not settled on a definite 'career path'.

Would be leavers:

The 'reluctant stayers', who lack opportunities beyond school and so remain.

Circumstantial leavers:

These are young people forced out of school for non-educational reasons: children from low income families and those with changed family income support circumstances are particularly vulnerable here.

Discouraged leavers:

Those who have not experienced success in their schooling and whose level of performance and interest in school is low.

Alienated leavers:

Similar to the discouraged leavers but are identified as having greater needs and would possibly be more difficult to re-engage.

According to Holden and Dwyer (1992), in trying to assess the relative importance of the various factors influencing the decision to leave early, the researchers came to the conclusion that

> examinations of the possible indicators to early school leaving have proven to be inconclusive. The early school leavers did not have a particularly negative family background, and their histories from running away and truanting were also not dominant factors. If we return to the reasons young people gave for leaving, and at the same time acknowledge the validity of their perceptions and judgements, the answer becomes fairly clear. Family and financial constraints contributed to early school leaving as did curriculum and failure,

but it is the relevant weighting given to factors such as teacher relationships and boredom in the school that signal the main areas for concern (Holden and Dwyer, 1992: 15) (see table; appendix 2: 11).

Holden and Dwyer came to the conclusion that the factor which most influences young people to leave school early is the unsatisfactory nature of the school culture itself. The school culture is characterised by three distinct elements which contribute to the alienation of some young people and these are:

- a non-stimulating environment that has no discernible relation to the wider community or the adult world to which the young person is beginning to gain access;

- lack of support and referral to appropriate agencies for young people who are experiencing problems in their personal or academic lives;

- negative teacher/student relationships which are propped up by rules and regulations which disallow young people from expressing themselves as adult and responsible members of the school community.

The study identified negative views about schools and teachers as the most common ground for leaving. Many of the participants in the project had just drifted into the decision to leave. Not many gave a clear indication that it was a well thought out choice or seen as a positive option for an alternative situation in life.

Experiences of the 132 early leavers are fully documented in the following reports (see Youth Research Centre 1990; Holden and Dwyer 1992; Holden 1992; Holden 1993). These describe two significant aspects of the experiences of these young people:

a) a majority left because of the 'push' factor of a negative experience of school rather than because of the 'pull' of a good job or a clear concept of their future options;

b) at the end of three years, no clear pathways could be identified in their post-school options. Most young people 'managed' through a variety of strategies, moving from employment to the support of family or friends, to income support and perhaps back to a period of employment (Holden and Dwyer, 1992).

One very important aspect of this study was that most early leavers, in reflecting back on their decision, remained convinced that "at the time it was the right thing to do" or that they were 'glad' or 'lucky' they left when they did. Contrary to popular thinking, these young people had no regrets about leaving. Dwyer (1996b) adds a word of caution when planning strategies to re-engage these early leavers, suggesting we recognise and seriously consider the level of alienation experienced by these particular leavers.

Similarly Batten and Russell (1995) have found the significant influence that schools and their 'culture' have on young people and on their decision to leave school early. This supporting material emerged during student interviews. It is clustered into five main themes around the need for:

- teachers to give students more academic and personal support so that they do not feel overwhelmed by studies;
- the school to increase the range of subjects available;
- more practical studies and work experience to be provided;
- more effective means of convincing students of the academic, social, employment and other benefits of staying on at school; and
- more engaging learning processes.

(also see appendix 3: table in Batten and Russell, 1995, p 31, drawing on work done by Bradley, 1992)

Batten and Russell also draw on the work of the Human Relations and Equal Opportunity Commission Report (Burdekin, 1989) to report on the possible link between the role of the education system in contributing to homelessness, to early school leaving of the homeless, and to assisting the homeless.

Features of schooling which were seen to contribute to homelessness and to early leaving were:

- irrelevant curricula;
- poor student/teacher relations;
- inflexible and alienating institutional structures;
- rejection or neglect of under-achievers;
- suspension or expulsion of difficult students;
- rejection by peers or teachers; and
- inadequate or inappropriate treatment for truancy.

Dwyer (1996b) more recently describes what he sees as the barriers to effective attendance and success for young people. He does so under four sub-headings. The first three of these (personal, peer-group and relational factors) are not new to the debate around school leaving. It is the fourth sub-heading (motivational factors) which shifts the emphasis in understanding the issue of early school leaving and which may help shape a path towards responsible and appropriate responses to this problem.

1. *Personal:*

   Under this subheading Dwyer includes family and personal difficulties which can contribute directly to truanting and the dropping out of school. He maintains that currently many families are subject to serious stress and consequently their capacity to support, both emotionally and financially, their offspring who are running into difficulties with their schooling is severely restricted.

2. *Peer-group barriers:*

   Comments have been made in recent studies which suggest that, because of harassment of various kinds, school was not a happy place to be. Boys spoke of gangs and those in higher years bullying them; girls spoke of 'name calling', 'backstabbing' and 'gossiping'. Dwyer also refers to the work of Coventry *et al* (1984) when making a link between peer group pressure and truanting. Coventry argues that unsuccessful students are less likely to be committed to the values of the school and hence are more likely to be susceptible to peer group pressure. Coventry further suggests that peer group attachments seemed much more important than family background as a major influence on non-attendance.

3. *Relational Factors:*

Holden and Dwyer (1992) suggest that alienation from schooling is often the result of poor teacher student relationships. This work has been referred to previously. Dwyer includes the work of Beresford (1993) who suggests problems arise due to the inflexibility of school structures, poor student-teacher relationships, rejection or neglect of underachievers and expulsion and suspension as disciplinary practices.

4. *Motivational Factors:*

Dwyer contends that for some young people, the experience of failure at school can be interpreted by them as a 'lack of ability' which can lead to a belief that they now also 'lack approval' which then has them disengaging.

Anderman and Maehr (1994) describe one of the major factors contributing to early school leaving as "a mismatch between student and school environment that is likely to occur during adolescence". They continue:

> there is a developmental mismatch between the psychological needs of early adolescents and the types of environments that most schools provide. The typical middle grade school environment is characterised by few opportunities for students to make important decisions, (see also Holdsworth, 1997) excessive rules and discipline, poor teacher-student relationships, homogenous grouping by ability, and stricter grading practices than those in the elementary school years. However, early adolescence is characterised as a period of socio-cognitive development that is best nurtured by a strong sense of autonomy, independence, self determination and social interaction (1994: 193-4).

Dwyer concurs maintaining that

> at precisely the time when they are exploring their self image, the schooling context changes from one in which they had been able to discover during their primary years their own ability through displaying competence in a series of tasks into one where secondary schools place increasing emphasis on being measured by others in terms of comparative ability. This can set up a mismatch between the students' personal agenda and the school agenda to which they are expected at this time to conform. Instead of showing what they can do, they have to measure up (Dwyer, 1996b: 52).

Wyn and Holden (1994), with their gender-analysis research on young women and girls at risk within the context of early school leaving, provide a particular focus on what a specific group within the community identify as the issues for them around early school leaving and returning to school after a period of time away from the school. This two year study is based on interviews with 51 young women who had left school early. The young women were aged between 14 and 18. According to this research, young women were most likely to refer to negative experiences of the school culture and school organisation as the reasons for leaving school early. It was noted that personal factors were also an influence but not as important as the school related issues.

Factors influencing early school leaving for this particular group of young women were:

- the negative nature of relationships with teachers;
- inappropriate curriculum and limited subject choice;
- worry about the impact of the, then newly instigated, VCE and their ability to successfully complete school;
- failure at school, which meant the young women did not see the continuance of their education as a viable option.

Personal factors were also present, but less influential than school related issues:

- family related issues which affected their ability to continue at school, for example: desirability of young women obtaining an education; difficulties within the home (violence towards the young person or other members of the family, lack of study facilities, and parental support); and
- health issues that were related to the stress of school work and particular physical illnesses (Wyn and Holden, 1994: 8).

Issues identified by early school leavers were around the difficulty of re-entry, as well as lack of information and often misinformation about employment markets and health, and also the lack of alternatives to the secondary system.

For some of the young women, returning to school became an option for one or both of the following reasons:

- difficulty in obtaining employment in their chosen field because they lacked the minimum level of schooling required by employers;
- the boredom and feelings of uselessness in their situation.

However the majority refused to consider returning to school because, "they felt that school had little to offer them and was not worthwhile in terms of future employment prospects" (Wyn and Holden, 1994: 23). Others were concerned about their age (and how it related to school requirements such as having to wear a uniform). The young women in particular felt that "life experience and their maturation after leaving school presented a divide between themselves and other school students as well as a lessened ability to accept the restraints and impositions placed upon them by school structures" (Wyn and Holden, 1994: 23).

According to the young women, the return was difficult because the negative aspects of the school culture were invariably still there: rules and regulations, and the lack of autonomy and responsibility which had driven them to leave initially. The difference in age and maturity was also felt to be an additional pressure. Therefore they had to suffer some new and some old problems. Many would not return to a conventional school setting, as they found schools often unhelpful and past prejudices returning.

Generally it was expected that they would not have a successful return. Batten and Russell (1995) agree, suggesting that schools can make re-entry to school of early leavers either easy or difficult. Holden (1992) goes further, stating that schools have often refused to allow re-entry, regarding early leavers as 'troublemakers' and uninterested in learning.

Reasons given for unsuccessful returning to school were:

- late enrolments meant limited subject choice;
- negative reactions from school staff, some of whom offered little encouragement or support;

- lack of support within the school, based on a lack of acknowledgment or underplaying of the difficulties returning students faced eg two young women returned, one with children and the other pregnant ;
- inadequate financial support;
- troublesome classroom and schoolyard dynamics associated with the age discrepancy between the young women and other students;
- finding the school and curriculum even less relevant after being out of school for some time and attempting to establish themselves as independent adults (Holden, 1992: 22).

Hixson and Tinzmann (1990) maintain that within schools there exist powerful systemic barriers to re-entry in the form of:

1. discriminatory treatment: "come in but you may not belong";
2. structural and programmatic barriers: narrow curriculum, no support within the school;
3. declining support for schools to cater for different needs of students: the Schools of the Future philosophy require competitive outlooks and guaranteed outcomes;
4. the system struggles to cater for "a more broadly successful educational environment".

In addition, the National Youth Affairs Research Scheme report on Under-age School Leavers (Brooks, Milne, Paterson, Johansson and Hart, 1997) talks of similar barriers to returning to school experienced by young people, beginning with the difficulty of accessing TAFE for those either under 16 or without year 10 qualifications. The report also uses the following categories to more fully explain the influences on young people:

The Personal:

- lack of adequate financial support;
- finding school and the curriculum even less relevant to them once they had made the attempt to establish themselves as independent adults;
- having to return to an environment that allows individuals the minimum of autonomy and responsibility.

The School:

- where they enrolled late they were unable to study their preferred subjects;
- negative reactions from school staff who tended to offer little encouragement or support to young people returning to their old school;
- lack of general support within the school because of a tendency to ignore or underplay the difficulties faced by young people returning to school.

Peers:

- placement in classes with younger people who are not committed to learning;
- troublesome classroom and schoolyard dynamics associated with the age discrepancies between the young people returning to school and the other students.

The material here is similar to the other studies (Dwyer and Holden, 1992; Wyn and Holden, 1994; Batten and Russell, 1995; Dwyer, 1996a and b). However the NYARS report's contention that these barriers are "psychological and social rather than structural, such as attitudes of the young people, responses by peers and the attitudes of school authorities and teachers" (Brooks, Milne, Paterson, Johansson and Hart, 1996: vi), is challenged in particular by Batten and Russell, 1995; and by Dwyer (1989). Batten and Russell contend

> structural factors external to the individual, family, and school but impinging strongly on each of these, influence the educational achievement of young people. These factors include the level of unemployment, including youth unemployment, that Australia's economic policy and condition have created; the availability of housing and housing costs resulting from the country's housing policy; the level and availability of community support and services, that national and state policies determine. (Batten and Russell, 1995: 48)

Dwyer, in supporting this point, is again emphasising the need to understand the importance of structural influences on educational achievement and the need to shift away from the approach that focuses on "personal inadequacies and the breakdown of interpersonal relationships within the family units" when attempting to understand the complex issue of why young people leave school early or have difficulties returning (quoted in Batten and Russell, 1995: 49).

Summary: The Literature

The literature identifies the following as major issues in relation to early school leaving and barriers to returning to school:

- there is no 'one' typical school leaver;
- young people leave school early or find it difficult to return to school because of a complex set of reasons;
- the student as 'deficit' approach to understanding young people's motivations is inadequate;
- structural factors are often ignored when determining reasons for early school leaving or difficulties in returning to school;
- the current economic climate encourages schools to be driven by the guarantee of 'educational outcomes' rather than catering for the needs of young people;
- the unsatisfactory nature of the school culture is a major factor in influencing early school leaving and creating barriers to returning;
- the ability of schools to cater for the multifaceted needs of young people is extremely limited;
- the middle school years are now an extremely important transition point for young people;
- those young people returning to school often face the same difficulties which 'pushed' or encouraged them to leave in the first place.

Part 3:

Numbers of Young People Affected

Initial estimates of the numbers of young people in Victoria affected by the introduction of the Youth Allowance, drew upon the statewide figures for recipients of the Youth Training Allowance. It was estimated in the brief for this research that approximately 6000 young people in Victoria would be expected to be required to return to some form of education or training in 1999.

The changes to the legislation, and in particular the nature of exemptions permitted, increase the uncertainty about the numbers of young people who will be directly affected by the changes. Specifically, it is unclear as yet as to the numbers of young people who:

- will not be eligible for the Youth Allowance because of family means tests, and thus for whom economic incentives to stay in or return to school are not relevant; or
- will claim and be granted exemptions as outlined.

Retention Rates

In light of the focus on retention, an alternative source of information about the size of the population to be affected exists in recent statistics on retention rates and, specifically, on transition rates for students in the appropriate age groups. The following information is provided by the Victorian Department of Education:

Year 7 to 12 Retention Rates for Victorian Government and Non-Government schools (mid-year census)

Year	**1991**	**1992**	**1993**	**1994**	**1995**	**1996**	**1997**
Rate (%)	75.6	81.4	79.4	78.0	75.5	75.9	77.1

It is perhaps more instructive to look at the actual numbers of students in years 10, 11 and 12 over these years and the decrease in the numbers in each year:

Year	**Yr 10**	**Yr 11**	**Yr 12**	**Yr 10-11**	**Yr 11-12**
1991	62060	59535	50576	-2525	-8959
1992	60400	58054	52276	-2346	-5778
1993	59081	55248	49352	-3833	-5896
1994	57281	54321	47102	-2960	-7219
1995	56889	52711	45769	-4178	-6942
1996	57295	52590	45536	-4705	-7054
1997	58612	53432	45921	-5180	-7511

The substantial fluctuations in the numbers of students apparently leaving school is, however, linked to changes in the base number of students within each cohort. To make this clearer, if we trace a year's cohort (diagonally) we can see the change in numbers of students moving from one level to the next more clearly. (These figures, however, hide the number of students 'repeating' a level.)

Base Year (Yr 10)	Yr 10	Yr 11	Yr 12	Yr 10-11	Yr 11-12
1991	62060	58054	49352	-4006	-8702
1992	60400	55248	47102	-5152	-8146
1993	59081	54321	45769	-4760	-8552
1994	57281	52711	45536	-4570	-7175
1995	56889	52590	45921	-4299	-6669
1996	57295	53432		-3863	
1997	58612				

The fluctuations in numbers of students not staying from one level to the next still exist, but are now more predicatble. 'Transition rates' are both supplied for Government schools (February census numbers) or can be calculated for all schools from these figures:

	Year	1992-3	1993-4	1994-5	1995-6	1996-7
Govt	Yr 10-11	95.9%	94.3%	92.6%	94.1%	95.4%
Govt	Yr 11-12	84.6%	81.6%	80.4%	84.1%	84.6%
All	Yr 10-11	91.5%	91.9%	92.0%	92.4%	93.3
All	Yr 11-12	85.0%	85.3%	84.3%	86.4%	87.3%

The bottom figures should allow for student movement between school systems within Victoria. However, in these figures, we must allow for students who move to schools interstate, take up jobs or move into the TAFE sector. There will therefore probably always be a transition rate of less than 100%.

It is still difficult to use these simple figures to estimate the percentage of students in each cohort who would be subject to the changes to the Youth Allowance and therefore under economic pressure to stay at or return to school. However, from these figures it is now possible to 'benchmark' desirable transition rates and use these targets to estimate numbers of both 'stayers' and 'returners'. In comparison to current trends (in year 10 numbers and transition rates), figures for three moderate increases in transition rates are:

		Current Trends		Targeted Trends					
Rate		93.3%	87%	94%	88%	95%	89%	96%	90%
	Yr 10	Yr 11	Yr 12	Yr 11	Yr 12	Yr 11	Yr 12	Yr 11	Yr 12
Year	1997	1998	1999	1998	1999	1998	1999	1998	1999
	58612	54656	47550	55095	48484	55681	49556	56268	50641
Year	1998	1999	2000	1999	2000	1999	2000	1999	2000
	59000	55018	47865	55460	48805	56050	49885	56640	50976

Other targeted rates can also be inserted into this model, and trends estimated beyond the year 2000, though with decreasing reliability. For each target rate, it is then possible to estimate the numbers of extra students being **retained** at each of years 11 and 12 in a particular year:

Year	1999			2000			2001		
Target Rate	+1%	+2%	+3%	+1%	+2%	+3%	+1%	+2%	+3%
Extra students	1376	3039	4713	1390	3069	4761	1421	3139	4869

The target figures can also be applied to estimate the numbers who might **return** to school.

This indicates an immediate increase in 1999 of between 1350 and 4700 students (with a split approximately 2:1 between year 12:year 11) just from students **staying** at schools, and in the year 2000, an increase of a further 1400 to 4800 students.

If these estimated percentages are applied to students who might be required to **return** to school (who have left in the past 12 months), a further 1000 to 4000 students would seem to be affected in the first year. This latter figure should be treated with some caution, however, as the period of time out of schools would have naturally increased the numbers in this group in work, in training schemes, in TAFE or in case management.

Absenteeism

A third and indirect indicator may draw upon information about school absenteeism. The literature has pointed to the strong connection between recurrent absenteeism or truancy and early school leaving.

Victorian data has not been regularly available in this area and in fact only Tasmania publishes regular data on school attendance (Cohen and Ryan, 1998). The Tasmanian information indicates a system-wide "proportion of students absent for one or more days in the week is 19.25%" (ibid), with between 6.0 and 7.7% of all students absent on any one day (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1996: 9); South Australian data reported a 9.8% non-attendance rate in secondary schools, with daily absenteeism rates in some areas of 15 to 20% of students (ibid: 11); a longitudinal New Zealand study reports 40% of students between the ages of 11 and 16 years truanting at least once, and 7.1% of a sample of 1000 students were labelled as recurrent truants (ibid). If these New Zealand figures were appled to Victoria, for instance, approximately 4000 students at year 10 would be directly targeted as 'at risk'.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee reported that:

> this State and Territory data underestimates the real incidence of school non-attendance. Existing school attendance data collections record formal suspensions, exclusions and expulsions and do not identify the extent of 'informal exclusions', chronic truancy, and those children and young people who have 'dropped out' from school completely (ibid: 12-13).

'Vanished' Students

Finally, there is very informal information about the numbers of young people (particularly within the compulsory school ages) who are 'out of school' full time. Community workers in one district reported an estimate of 200 young people, some as young as 12 years of age, who were 'between schools'. These were young people who had neither been formally suspended nor expelled, but who have been 'encouraged' to seek schooling elsewhere (often for behavioural reasons) and for whom this discouragement had resulted in a discontinuation of any form of schooling.

It should be made clear that in the cases of the latter two groups (absentees and 'vanished' students) there is currently no income provision involved; the introduction of the Youth Allowance will not act as a deterrent to being out of school. However, neither will it act as a particular incentive for these students to stay in or return to schools full time.

Returning to Schools or TAFE?

As the changes to the Youth Allowance provisions were adopted, it has become clearer that the immediate impact in terms of numbers of students will be felt within the schools sector. While there will be some increase expected in the pressure for TAFE enrolments, the emphasis on retention of students, and on students returning to education within a short time after initially leaving school, will mean that changes to school enrolments will be most relevant.

In addition, there is strong pressure on TAFE to improve the 'quality' of its students (DEETYA Analysis and Evaluation Division, 1998: 16-17). It appears unlikely that students who have left schools for reasons of low academic success or because of behavioural issues, will find it easy to adapt to current TAFE learning environments which are also under pressure for quality outcomes.

This report therefore focuses largely upon comments from young people about the schools sector. However, the educational program characteristics suggested in part 9 are meant to be appropriate to both schools and TAFE Colleges.

Part 4:

This Study: Methodology

A four-stage methodology was undertaken within this project:

1. A detailed literature review on local and international remedial and intervention strategies, with particular emphasis on issues of re-entry and re-engagement has been completed.

2. Retention rates have been documented.

3. Localised case studies and focus group analysis have been undertaken to test practical responses to issues emerging from items one and two, with the intention of identifying significant characteristics of likely local Youth Allowance participants.

4. Strategic planning analysis of the above for the purposes of developing a grid relationship between typologies of needs and expectations of Youth Allowance participants and a matrix of matching approaches and interventions to develop measurable outcomes has also been completed.

Four sites were selected for the focus groups, two metropolitan, two rural:

- Northern Region: Preston, Northcote, Reservoir;
- Western Region: Hoppers Crossing, Werribee, Laverton;
- Barwon South Region: Camperdown, Timboon, Cobden, Warrnambool;
- Gippsland Region: Traralgon, Moe, Morwell and Wonthaggi.

In each area we interviewed individuals or conducted focus groups with Principals and Assistant Principals of schools, teachers, Student Welfare Coordinators, Service Providers (including social workers, youth workers, family crisis workers and accommodation support workers), Centrelink, Human Services, DEETYA and DSS personnel and Department of Education Management. Information from a total of 104 people was obtained in this study.

In addition, a locational matrix was identified to define discussions with young people relevant to this study. Initially it was suggested that a 4-cell matrix would define location and orientation, but eventually a more complex formation appeared (see over page):

	Out of school	In school
Negative about education	• school leavers • don't want to return • returned and then left again	• identified by schools or selves as 'at risk' of leaving • potential early school leavers
Uncertain about education		• express positive views about education generally • behaviour exhibits ambivalence towards schooling • identified by schools as 'at risk' of leaving school early
Positive about education	• early school leavers • want to return to some form of education	• successfully returning students

The study attempted to locate young people in each of these areas through schools, other educational agencies, youth workers and other community organisations in each of the four geographical areas.

In these discussions, the over-simplicity of this characterisation became apparent, as, for example, many respondents would be typified as positive about education, but negative about school ("I need to get an education, but no way am I going back to school.") Similarly, other would indicate substantial dis-satisfaction with school, but say they intended to continue - and are included here as highly relevant to the 'retaining' category under the introduction of the Youth Allowance. It is apparent that reactions to school, rather than generally to education, distinguishes between the groups of students.

While the intention was to talk to significant numbers of young people in each of the four categories, and in the short period of the study it was possible to have discussions with 111 young people, they were distributed in an uneven pattern:

	Out of school	In school
Negative about returning to/staying in school	17	28
Uncertain about returning to/staying at school		55
Positive about returning to school	3	8

Large numbers (55) of young people within schools were identified to this study on the basis of school expectations that they would leave, but who then expressed a positive orientation to education. Student Welfare Coordinators at several of the schools indicated that this may have been a 'temporary' phenomena and that if similar focus groups had been conducted towards the middle of the school year (when messages of 'failure' were being conveyed) the results would have been very different.

Issues arising from the methodology

Construction of responses:

It became apparent that there needed to be a 'reality check' on the comments of the young people. The researchers are concerned that some young people interviewed were perhaps 'constructing' stories to:

a) fulfil a need to create a perception of their world which may not be totally accurate. For example they may say they are doing 'okay' at school and passing everything and yet the teacher may have a different perception.

b) 'tell the researchers what they wanted to hear'. For example, when running focus groups in one regional secondary college, students were asked via a follow-up survey if they were happy to stay at school. The study received 24 identical responses, "we will stay at school because we want a good education and that will then lead on to good job opportunities". This raises considerable uncertainty as to whether the teacher had talked about possible responses they could give for a survey before the researchers arrived, whether this was simply the "right response" according to a standard "value of education" message, or whether they were genuinely happy at school.

Difficulties in finding and interviewing young people

It proved difficult to locate and interview many young people who had left school. In all four sites a number of attempts were made by teachers, Student Welfare Coordinators and Service Providers to make contact with young people they knew who 'fitted' this category. Although 20 young people were finally interviewed (some of whom were positive about returning to school), it was anticipated that the study would be able to locate a greater number than was achieved. This was principally a result of the study's short time lines. One school offered to 'chase up' some young people in the 'positive-out' category but were unable to do so within the time-frame. Previous work (eg Holden 1992, 1993) has emphasised the importance of longitudinal data in gaining trust and confidence of young people in these areas. This study was also closely linked with two topics which convey strong negative messages to this group: 'return to school' and 'changes to allowances'; it was perhaps not surprising that potential respondents 'disappeared'.

In a wider context, it is also important to note the number of young people (particularly young women) who perhaps fit the 'negative-out' category but who are simply lost to the system, and uncontacted by local agencies. Dwyer (1996a) talks about the numbers of early school leavers who depart before the legal age and simply 'disappear'. He believes these young people will remain 'invisible' unless they happen to reappear for some reason through contact with or under the jurisdiction of some other institution of our society.

It was also difficult to locate and interview those students who had left school early but had then returned successfully. Few of these could be identified within the schools in the study. This replicates findings of earlier studies and suggests that there have been few changes to the opportunities and barriers outlined in the previous section of this report.

Finally, it proved difficult to determine numbers of young people who had left school early and gone to either another training institution or had been successful in gaining

employment. Few schools kept accurate records of or are able to keep close connections with those students who have previously left. If the young person is employed they are unlikely to be linked into any 'income support' or service provider. Hence they are not visible to the school or welfare community; they have joined a 'different' community.

Part 5:

Eight Case Studies

The following case studies are drawn directly from the accounts of students, young people, teachers and support workers. The actual words of young people have been used where possible, but some efforts have been made to preserve anonymity. In particular, names have been changed and, in some cases, information from two or more situations have been collapsed into one story.

Case Study 1:

The Informant: **Student Welfare Coordinator**
The Young Person: **Troy**
The Impact of: **The school response (negative)**

The story starts several years ago, in a secondary college in a small country town. Troy was then in year 9, frequently in trouble with the school administration - and neither side were dealing with it well.

Troy walked along the corridor to his next class, running late - again. In fact, this was the third time this week, so he'd be in line for an after school detention. He passed the Principal.

"Put your cap around the right way; get that ring out of your lip!" the Principal shouted at him.

"Get F....," shouted Troy back.

The Principal glared at him. "That's ten days' suspension for you; come with me to the office, right now."

But Troy took off and ran out of the school. "I'm never going back to that hole," he muttered.

The Student Welfare Coordinator rang his mother that evening. He would talk to the Principal to make sure that Troy could return after the ten days.

But it was about three weeks before Troy's mother could persuade Troy to return. The SWC helped negotiate his return to school and offered support to Troy.

For a couple of days, Troy was hanging in there with the support from the SWC, a few teachers and Troy's mates. But it wasn't easy.

He was standing in the yard at lunch time with his friends when the Principal went past again. Troy now had coloured hair and a ring in his eyebrow as well.

The Principal went berserk. "Troy! I told you to get that ring out of your lip! We don't want your kind at this school. That's another 10 day suspension."

This time, when Troy took off, he didn't go back. Because it was a small country town and the next nearest school was an hour on the bus he didn't go back to any other school either.

A few years later, the SWC bumped into Troy's mother in town. Troy was still unemployed and a heavy substance abuser. Troy's mum blamed the Principal. She felt that his reaction to Troy had been the turning point for Troy. Unfortunately for that town she wasn't the only mother who the SWC had bumped into, that had expressed those same feelings.

Case Study 2:

The Informant: **Cathie - VCE Coordinator**
The Young Person: **Keith**
The Impact of: **The school response (positive)**

The teachers were discussing the kids in the staffroom. Cathie, the VCE coordinator, was saying how pleased she was to see that Keith had made it to Year 11. "I don't think he would have made it at another school," she said. "The whole school approach we adopt to supporting kids - developing close relationships between teachers and students - has made a real difference for Keith."

Keith was happy with the school as well. "My father left school at 15 after one teacher's report had said that he was 'a waste of taxpayer's money'. But, when he left, he was able to get an apprenticeship straight away.

"I'd also like to get an apprenticeship but I knew that I'd only have a chance if I got to the end of year 11. The real difference was the teacher. They told me that even though I found the work hard and that I always needed support from them to be able to complete it, they wanted me to stay on at the school. That was real important to me.

"One of my main problems was that I find it difficult to write fast enough to stay up with the rest of the class. Sometimes I feel like an idiot for slowing down the rest of the class when they always had to wait for me. But I can type OK. So the school and the town got together to raise some money so that they could buy me a laptop computer to take around to all my classes. That made me feel pretty special.

"The school also has a wide range of practical subjects for me to do, and that will maybe help me in getting my apprenticeship in the near future."

Case Study 3:

The Informant: **Student**
The Young Person: **Justin**
The Impact of: **Course structures**

"I've just returned to school. After year 9, I spent a year out of school helping my uncle as a labourer on building sites. That was until he accidentally chopped off three fingers with the circular saw, so he couldn't work any more, and I couldn't work with him. I was working up in the city then, so I had to move back to the country with my dad.

"So I've come back to school in year 11 now.

"The school's pretty cool, even though you're meant to wear a uniform. They have given up hassling me about it because they know I can't afford one.

"My biggest problem is with the work load. I'm doing five subjects which would be OK if the teachers got together to sort out when to make our work requirements due in. But on top of that just in one subject, say English, they give us three activities to do at one time. It's too much and I don't know if I will be able to keep up. Why don't they let us do one task at a time and get it finished before we have to start the next one?

"I wish they had some subjects without as much writing - subjects that involved making things and not having to write about them."

Case Study 4:

The Informant: **Cheryl: Youth Worker**
The Young Person: **Narelle**
The Impact of : **Coming from the right family in rural areas**

"It's not fair!" said Cheryl. She had been trying for two weeks to negotiate with the only senior secondary college in the district for Narelle to return to school. Only last week she had heard that they had let Catherine back in: she was just as difficult as Narelle and had done the same sort of things.

"Why would they give one a second chance and not the other?" she pondered.

Then it dawned on her! "The only difference was the sort of family they came from. Narelle's family was known in the district as coming from the wrong side of the tracks, while Catherine was from one of the well known grazing families of the area. Normally the kids from that family went to boarding school but times were a bit hard at the moment.

"It makes it so hard for the kids before they even start," thought Cheryl. The kids often complained that unless you were known to come from the right family, you couldn't even get any of the part-time work in the area. "Class background shouldn't be such a big factor in whether they will give kids a go, but it certainly seems to be that way."

Case Study 5:

The Informant: **Student**
The Young Person: **Maree**
The Impact of : **Leaving and returning a number of times**

I first left school in year 9 because I got busted smoking in school uniform and the school was really crap. I didn't like how people pick on you and the teachers expect you to do the work really quick even when you don't understand it.

So I left voluntarily to try and get a job but I couldn't find one. I got sick of just spending time at home looking after the house. I went back to the same school but my friends harassed me so I left again.

This time I have tried returning to a different school, where people don't know my background. It's a new start for me. There are only 10s, 11s, and 12s here, because it's a senior campus and there is no uniform.

I like this school better so I hope I can stay here.

Case Study 6:

The Informant: **Students**
The Young People: **Anna and Carlos**
The Impact of : **Leaving and returning**

Anna and Carlos have both returned to the same school after a number of years away from their previous schools.

Anna: The flexibility of this school makes a real difference for me. I have a young child, so the teachers don't mind if I miss assembly or have to take time off if she is sick.

Carlos: Yeah, the small class sizes really help me. I've found I need extra help to get through the work. Last week I got chucked out of my house, but the SWC was able to find me somewhere to go for the time being. I got a bit behind with my work but the teachers have been pretty good about it, till I get things sorted out.

Anna: It's hard to find a school that doesn't have a uniform and recognises that I have been out of school for a few years, but it was really necessary for me to come back to school to complete year 12 so that I can get a traineeship afterwards. I don't want to be on supporting parent benefit and the dole for the rest of my life.

Carlos: I don't want to be on the dole for the rest of my life either. I was on the dole for 12 months. At first it was good not having any demands on me, but after a while it really got to me - boring - just sitting at home watching the TV. I quite like cooking so the careers coordinator suggested that I could do catering. Its a bit of a bludge but its better than sitting at home.

Case Study 7:

The Informants: **Assistant Principal, young person**
The Young Person: **Julian**
The Impact of : **Returning to a school - past reputations**

"Bloody School!" said Julian. "I never thought I would have to go back, but Centrelink says if I want to keep my allowance I have to return to school."

Julian went to the school to see about enrolling.

The Assistant Principal was just coming out of a classroom when he spotted Julian at the general office. He drew a deep breath; he couldn't believe his eyes. He's not back again, is he? A year ago the school had tried to support Julian when he wanted to leave the school and take up a short course offered at the Local Community Housing Program. Julian was well known to the Assistant Principal, as he had been in trouble with the police for both using and selling drugs at the school and was also generally regarded as very difficult to 'handle'. Of course there was also the issue of protecting the other students from drugs being sold within the school.

The AP approached Julian to ask him what he was doing at the school. He probably did not appear very welcoming - and probably for a good reason. He was pleased to see the back of him last year.

Julian became uncomfortable, still feeling really angry about having to come back to school. He tried to push past the AP and leave. The AP thought he was going to hit him so he yelled, "I'll have you on assault charges if you try that again..."

Julian later says that he 'lost it' at that point; it was everything about school that he hated right there in front of him. He responded, "If you try and lay charges you won't be around to know about it!"

He then ran out of the office, into the school grounds and out the gate.

Julian said later to a mate, "You know, if they make me go, I really I think I'll have to find a different school."

Case Study 8:

The Informant: **Student**
The Young Person: **John**
The Impact of : **Overwhelming forces in a supportive school**

I came to this school because my brother was here and he used to say that the teachers were okay. He was right.

I also get to do the practical subjects I like: like auto prac, woodwork, info tech and outdoor ed and the teachers never hassle me about what I wear.

I have a few friends here but I like to spend my time out of school with my mates down at the panel beaters. I ask them every week if there is a job going, so far no luck, but I will keep on trying as I really want to get out of this place.

Part 6:

What Young People Say

Why do Young People *Stay* at School?

To understand what young people are saying about why they leave school, and about their attitudes to schooling, it is useful to start by looking at the answers that young people give to indicate why they stay at school. These responses have helped to form the schema outlined in the previous section. They say they stay at school because of:

a) a general (non-specific) understanding that that's what one does

- "You need an education."
- "I like it because there is nothing to do at home and I want to get an education."

b) a commitment to obtaining the deferred outcomes of education

- "Because I want a really good job when I'm older and I want an education."
- "I want to finish my education so I can get a good job and support myself."
- "Home would be boring; we need an education so therefore we are stuck at school so we can get a better education to get a job."
- "You need to successfully complete your university."
- Most jobs require you to have completed VCE."

c) a success in learning and its associated pleasure/joy/acceptance

(comments not found in this group: almost by definition)

d) pressure of or from families (social, economic, comparative)

- "Because I can get more out of education than my parents did."

e) the importance of social links (friends etc)

- "I don't want to leave school because I want to get educated and I would miss my friends."
- "I don't want to leave education because all my friends are here and I would get bored if I was not at school."

Overall, when the young people interviewed in this study talked of the reasons for **staying** at school, they tended to give either generalist, non-specific answers or highlight highly instrumental reasons (accepting that there would be some form of deferred outcome such as improved access to jobs).

It is also clear from their comments that a substantial breakdown in any of these areas, or the dominance in importance of negative factors as outlined below, means that young people leave school, refuse to return or fail to continue in education.

Thus young people talk about why they left school both in terms of such a **breakdown in the positive reasons** for education:

a) the collapse of a tradition of going to school;
b) not being able to see that future outcomes exist;
c) a lack of success in learning;
d) the lack of family pressure or value on education;
e) the lack of social links (no friends, friends elsewhere etc);

and as a **growth in the negative impact** of school (school is an actively unpleasant experience):

a) social failure - lack of friends etc through to bullying;
b) outcome (learning) failure - not succeeding at school, not understanding, not getting anywhere;
c) personal (behavioural) failure - in trouble, resisting, being put down.

contrasted with the **positive alternatives** that are perceived to exist outside school along these same dimensions:

- social success - friends are located out of school, with time etc (socially nicer/more exciting places to hang out);
- outcome (earning) success - possibilities of immediate income (income support, legitimate earning or black economy);
- personal (behavioural) success - possibilities for roles of value and esteem.

The balance of these forces applies differentially to different groupings of young people. Some strongly identify reasons for staying at school, but highlight the negative experiences of failure, behaviour or rejection that 'drive' them out; for others the breakdown in factors that connect or attach them to education is most significant. The schema outlined in the previous section is particularly useful for visualising both the basic 'attachment' students have to education, and the 'pushes' and 'pulls' in various areas that diminish or destroy that attachment.

In our interviews and focus groups, young people who had already left school talked overwhelmingly of the influence of negative school factors. They saw the decision to leave as having been made for them by others:

Structural and curriculum issues such as inappropriate subjects:

- "Having to make a decision in year 9 about the direction you wanted to go in Year 11 and 12: it was too early."
- "There is too much theory in the classes."
- "I was bored and the work was totally irrelevant to me."

Personal failure at school and its consequences (learning-behaviour nexus):

- "I failed 6 out of the 8 units in year 11. I left and tried to get a job but couldn't."

- "I couldn't stand the teachers and I failed anyway. I wanted to be treated like an adult; I thought about the army."

- "I had problems with reading, writing and spelling. I felt like I was holding the class back because I couldn't get stuff off the board in time. The kids called me names like 'airhead'."

- "I was treated like a kid at school, and felt like I was in a sardine tin. I had a horror of school, day in, day out. I found the work and homework difficult."

- "I dropped out at year 7. I can only read mirror image - it was embarrassing in class. (It didn't help when) the teacher brought in a mirror to be a smartarse in front of all the kids."

Behavioural clashes with the school:

- "School is like one big neighbourhood watch... If you challenge the VP your life becomes hell, your parents are called up and you are made to feel as small as possible... We are not allowed to walk on the carpet outside the library or enter the school from the front door: this is for visitors only."

- "We want to be treated as adults; the teachers should have to wear uniforms to see what it is like... The teachers are always believed before us and (one teacher) is a complete jerk."

Many of the comments talk of the failure of schools to deal with them as people - to assist in sorting out difficulties, which became educationally disabling:

- "Teachers don't support you; they don't sort out the trouble. I couldn't talk to the teachers about my problems and the year level coordinators were the ones handing out the detentions so I'm not going to talk to them."

For others, negative reactions to school are linked with economic or social pressures:

- "I liked doing cookery but it was expensive - up to $4 per class. This was difficult for mum ... this plus bus fare and lunch money was too much on a single pension... (Also) there was peer pressure at school - everyone noticed what you were wearing, how your hair was done."

If these students are also embedded in economic circumstances that provide no visions of hope, the positive connections to education are seriously eroded. One Student Welfare Coordinator commented: "Kids start school believing there is no work, have a feeling of hopelessness, are dependent on their family, and have a lack of motivation if the family is unemployed."

One student noted: "You have to have the right name to get a job in (this town)."

Emerging is a significant group who have simply **drifted** out of school. They are not necessarily failing or 'in trouble', but rather un-motivated. They talk about the passivity encouraged by school and have, in turn, learnt that passivity is an appropriate approach to life:

- "I didn't try any other schools after not getting back into (school name); I just didn't get around to it."

- "I transferred from interstate in year 8 and never found a new school. School was boring and I would find it difficult to return."

- "I left because I stopped attending for a few weeks. I didn't like getting up in the morning. The school cut off my Austudy. I had been passing everything up till then. Dad threw me out of home because I had promised to finish year 11 and 12. I haven't seen Dad for two years now. A social worker helped me find a flat on my own. I miss all my friends from school."

A teacher characterised the nihilism of these young people, and pointed to an important gender-related component of this drifting or reliance upon others:

- "A lot are leaving to nothing. They are sick of school, and drop out from mid year on... Girls go and live with their boyfriends."

Current Expectations and Attitudes

In discussing their current orientation to education with the young people who were negative about past experiences, recurrent themes emerged as they talked about their 'objections' to education.

For those young people currently in school, but identified to us, or self-identified as 'at risk' of leaving school early, they perceived:

themselves as failing or saw schools as being unable or unwilling to meet their educational needs:

- "I would leave school as soon as a suitable job came up. I don't like school. The teachers pressure you too much and don't help the people who aren't rocket scientists."

- "The workload: there is too much pen and paper... Subjects are limited with small numbers at the school - for example outdoor ed won't run... Combining of year 11 and 12 subjects means we always miss out; the teacher always looks after the year 12s first and then remembers us!" (There are 18 VCE subjects offered and 7 are combined.)

they were not helped in dealing with educational, social or 'external' pressures:

- "I want to leave school because I get picked on by other kids and plus family problems."

- "Because it's too hard ... (also because of) peer group pressure, being teased."

- "I'm not looking to return; I'm looking for work. I couldn't hack the way the teachers spoke to me."

Similarly, many of the young people currently out of school rejected the idea of returning to school as they understood it, and linked this rejection to the barriers they saw operating against a successful return:

- "I wouldn't return to school as it is - I want something more hands-on. I won't go to Melbourne to look for new schools, courses, or employment 'cause public transport would be just packed."

- "No way: I am looking for work - I'll do anything. I have gotten used to being out of school."

- "It wouldn't matter about the money (Youth Allowance) because it's not much and it will go into my parents' bank accounts anyway, so I won't see any of it."

- "I left because of too many fights. I'll just continue to live off mum. I wouldn't think of returning to school."

Even those that said they would like to return to school, saw difficulties:

- "Yes, but the school is full."

- "I turned up at the school the beginning of this year and they said it was full... I was looking forward to returning but there wasn't enough room, there wasn't the subjects I wanted anyway."

- "I would like to return but couldn't wear a uniform. I'd go for jobs but you need so many certificates to get a job."

- "I would go back to school because I need the qualifications. I wanted to go into year 10 to learn skills, but I was put in year 11 and found this too hard."

- "I would prefer to go to TAFE than school but need to find some extra help."

- "Having to get public transport means I can't get to TAFE."

In one rural area, the bus policy means that "parents and kids can't choose the school they would like to go to" according to one school Principal, and some students at the school note: "The bus policy means we can't even consider (a neighbouring school) if we wanted to. It's $98 a term to get there and then you leave early and return late."

In another region, there appeared to be no restriction on year 11 and 12 students' access to schools at a greater distance, thus allowing more options. It was reported that application of rules about bus access are made area by area by the bus coordinator, depending on places available at that time.

Changing Orientations to Schooling

In considering what would change their orientation to schools, the overwhelming response from these young people is that schools need to treat returning students in a more adult fashion, both in terms of rules and in terms of educational requirements.

Some of the students who had successfully returned to school described some of the **positive factors that had helped them**, and saw these in social terms:

- "The school is flexible - particularly if you're late to school; it has no uniforms, and has small classes. (This school) is so different to other schools because teachers give more time."
- "It has a SWC to help with housing problems."
- "From year 9, kids are able to leave school with a pass."

Similarly, students at school, but at risk of leaving, expressed these 'positives' in negative terms:

- "More teacher help with difficult work, more freedom to come and go as we like..."
- "Homerooms for year 11 and 12, not just year 12..."
- "I'd like to be treated as adults. When we asked to borrow the radio we were told 'no, you are only kids'..."
- "Also the petty rules re uniform and taking our shoes off and making us wear socks for the day if we come in the wrong shoes..."
- "We don't get the opportunity to act our age as they never give us the opportunity..."
- "A less strict seating plan than one which makes us sit in the same place everyday as a threat to keep everyone in line..."
- "I like the idea of a Peer Mentoring program with two teachers per classroom to help..."
- "A senior campus may work..."
- "An SRC which had some more oomph."

Others, currently out of school, saw the ability to undertake a worthwhile educational program as dependent on the ethos of the school:

- "A new program. I want to go to TAFE to do something more hands-on... I like the idea of being with other adults 'cause it makes me sit down and try a bit harder."
- "Teachers treating you as human beings: talking to you 'normally'."

In discussing the impact of the changes to the Youth Allowance with education and community workers in the areas, there was an expectation that approximately 25% of potential returners will successfully do so under threat of financial penalty. Some students will specifically resist returning and are classified by workers as 'survivors', currently existing within some form of the black economy and who say they will continue to do so.

Part 7:

Barriers Identified and Options Proposed

Systemic Issues

While most student comments about the barriers to returning to school or to staying on are directed towards school-level factors, many are also very perceptive about the broader context and pressure - the systemic barriers that exist to the establishment of alternative approaches that would encourage them to stay at or return to school. Their comments are also reflected in the responses of principals, teachers, support staff and of community-based welfare and youth workers.

Barriers and Criticisms	A Positive Response of Education
Resourcing: One Principal told us bluntly: "There are no resources to support programs to assist students returning to school" and another pointed to the "reduction of services in the region - it has one guidance officer servicing 13 schools." Other concerns were raised about the possibility of alternative programs at years 11 and 12 not being funded and of student enrolments in such programs not being counted towards school funding. Similarly, some schools criticised staffing formulae based on census figures, which penalised them for working positively with students who had difficulty in attending full-time or regularly. On a broader level, the lack of provision of adequate funding to states to implement programs as a consequence of Youth Allowance changes was identified as a problem.	Previous program development has emphasised the need for on-going funding for approaches, with at least a three year minimum commitment. The specific population involved in these changes is identified as requiring further specific resource allocation: "more external support and connections happening between service providers and schools". There needs to be a recognition in resource allocation that students staying on at or returning to school require more resourcing than the 'mainstream'. As one Principal said: "we also need greater resources to assist the kids with literacy, as they need more support than we can offer." One school argued that the staffing formula needs to recognise schools' responsibility for students who have difficulty attending consistently and not simply remove these students from the rolls.
Trapped in a Responsive Mode: Schools fear being asked to **adjust** or **respond** to the changes, rather than being supported to **plan** for changed needs. "There is also no time to work out what alternate programs can be introduced until they are on the doorstep." It was suggested that "there should be the opportunity to have a regional response rather than each school deal individually with the 40 plus kids expected (to return). The teachers can't cope with the added problems... Classes are worked out the year before and there is very little left by February when these kids will be on the doorstop."	It was suggested that there needs to be a systemic program response to the Youth Allowance introduction that affirms and supports the rôle of schools in provision of a wider range of options for students. Such a system approach would be one of 'permission and support' rather than of central control.

Competition: Inter-school competition for students, and the concomitant focus on 'school image' was also identified as a barrier: "We can't offer the sorts of programs we would like to because of the competition between schools; everything has to happen within the one school and of course there is not the resourcing to do it." "Now that schools are competing rather than developing a spirit of co-operation, there is not much being done to expand the curriculum offerings amongst a cluster of schools. The best option for the kids would be the development of a senior campus in the region, but this would mean (this school) closing and no-one here wants that."	Respondents identified a need for region-wide responses that encouraged cooperative approaches between schools.
VCE Inflexibility: Current offerings within the VCE were not seen by students, teachers or other workers as providing sufficient options for returning or retaining students. "The system with VCE is not set up for these kids." Equally, systemic barriers were identified to the ability of schools to offer alternative senior courses outside the VCE.	Both students and workers (teachers etc) foresee that it is unlikely that current VCE offerings will change in the direction of catering for the needs of these students. Thus the need for alternatives to or within the VCE are recognised; there needs to be resource recognition of such alternatives.
Lack of alternatives: Few genuinely alternative approaches are identified by respondents. This is particularly critical in rural areas and regional centres. "Both schools (in the town) are seen as only catering for the mainstream, with no real alternatives. The annexe of (one school) is seen as a prison for those who misbehave." "Schools have been restructured so that there is one provider in each town - so there should be no competition between schools, for example, as to who would take the difficult kids - not wanting difficult kids because that would lower their other numbers. But this means that there are no alternatives either." "The age of teachers - they're getting older in the profession - is a barrier to alternative programs being introduced."	It was suggested that a range of options should be available locally without economic, social or educational disadvantage: • within schools: "an alternative approach which is not stigmatising"; • "Also what is needed is a revised bus policy which would allow kids to choose schools (some would go to the more practically based programs at [another school]) and not be financially punished for it."
Specific rural issues: In rural areas, particular difficulties are identified, associated with resourcing of a range of subject offerings, the difficulties with the number of VET offerings because of the few work placements on offer in rural areas: "when you take one out of six teachers out of a school something has to give... usually it is curriculum offerings."	Specific attention to the needs of small rural and remote communities was emphasised.

Individual School Issues

Barriers and Criticisms	A Positive Response of Education
Intention: The **intention** of schools in facing the challenges of returning or retaining students is crucial. One respondent noted that "young people are not welcome back if the have burnt their bridges (or) blown it". If they want to return there is "no infrastructure to accept them back." "The message is 'what have you got to offer us?', not 'what can we do for you?'" Another notes: "Many of the kids have literacy problems, a lack of skills, don't see themselves as successful learners, have low self esteem, and a messed around family background." How do schools approach these challenges?	**Needs Audit:** It is suggested that schools start with the intention of carrying out an 'audit' of the unmet needs of these students - consulting with them about programs. A Principal notes that "Even though they (schools) need to lift their game in terms of the school's literacy performance, this is not the whole picture; we need to look at where these kids have come from and where they have got to rather than compare them to others." Another Principal talked of the school's "orientation program for those returning to school to measure the scale of the problem re literacy and work skills." One community worker suggested that all schools "have an entrance plan for kids to return to school after they have completed an eight-day course on conflict resolution, stress management and a discussion of the issues of why they left school initially. And then the school should plan the steps for a return to school." The schema outlined in part 8 of this report could provide one useful tool for assessing past history, present tensions and unmet needs.
Initial Attitude: The young people interviewed consistently comment on the 'welcome' (or otherwise) they receive from schools and rate this highly as a factor influencing a decision to return. Do schools **want** students to return, particularly those who they perceive as 'troublesome'? "Kids are welcomed into the school, but would have to toe the line." "Schools say no to returning students as they don't want the hassle but end up robbing the kids of their rights." "The Principal is tied up on image eg coloured hair, rings in the eyebrows. Kids will return and they get chucked out again. He holds grudges and yells at kids, gives them ten-day suspensions."	**A Welcoming School:** One Principal commented on the importance of the role: "The Principal has to be sympathetic to returning students."

The on-going ethos of the school:

The underlying atmosphere of welcome and support (or lack thereof) will continue to play an important role in determining whether returning or staying on is successful.

Some of the reports of school practices from teachers and community workers were of concern:

- "Kids are actively encouraged to leave. They are told by the Principal that their kind is not welcome here."
- "Schools are supportive of those kids who come from the 'right family'. One kid from a good family was allowed to return and was given a lot of help before this."
- "Schools are bluffing kids out of the system."

A Supportive Culture:

Respondents generally emphasised the importance of the 'culture' or ethos of a school in being accepting of **all** students. Indications of this for returning or retaining students might include:

- flexibility in regard to needs of students eg time usage;
- part-time study/work;
- giving responsibility to students;
- providing alternative trajectories to credit.

"They also need an environment which encourages more independence, not stricter controls."

"Confidence needs to be built; kids don't want to be laughed at."

Various suggestions by students were: "More hands-on material ... make it fun ... be less competitive ... be allowed to smoke and eat and involve life experiences in the classroom ... more conflict resolution ... involve the family."

Respondents generally highlighted issues about the nature and structure of the curriculum.

- "To force these kids into VCE is a disaster."
- "The regimentation of the school environment is the problem; it is not their intellectual capacity which is in question."

Curriculum options:

Positive suggestions highlighted the need for a wide variety of curriculum approaches that are characterised by being:

- hands-on;
- creative;
- negotiated;
- part-time;
- flexible.

Comments included:

- "A lot of the drug kids (seen as being required to return to school) have creative abilities.... they need broader programs, not just skills-based programs - they need the arts, drama."
- "Also part time programs to cater for this; also programs which are more vocationally oriented."
- "The courses are seen as relevant for them eg Adult education, Skillshare or TAFE programs which help build on the kids' self esteem."
- "... TAFE courses are much better than the VCE for these kids."

Support structures:

Strong comments were made by both students and support workers about the need for on-going support for returning students. These insisted that students could not be simply placed in schools and 'forgotten' or assumed to be coping. Equally it was recognised that similar on-going support is required by students already at school if they are to continue within education.

- "Kids out of school don't have confidence in their abilities..."
- "In small communities there is no one to negotiate for young people in flexible programs. Unless there is someone to advocate for kids, they don't have a chance."
- "The culture of schools prevents youth workers doing their job on the school site - they lock horns with schools which are inflexible... it is impossible to straddle the two cultures."
- "If you can't get an education, home breaks down because the parents can't cope with the kids being at home all the time."
- "The culture of the school denies the impact of the family on the kid's ability to be there; 'don't talk about the family' is institutionalised within the school system."

Holistic and on-going personal, family and social support:

It was suggested that a wide range of support needs to be provided either within schools or within local communities - or preferably in partnerships that acknowledge the broader social location of the students.

- "More of an understanding about the impact of families... schools also need to cater for what is going on at home."
- "More support for the kids."
- "Programs which would support those struggling to attend and or having difficulties at school, at home, or with the police."
- "Need to cater for kids who don't live at home ie accommodation options."

Part 8:

Understanding Unmet Needs

In interviewing young people in the various categories, both individually and in small focus groups, details emerged of their past experiences within school, their reactions to school (both past and present), their current orientations towards education and schooling, and their expressions of unmet needs.

In addition to the types of school leavers identified in earlier studies, this study has identified a group of school leavers who have neither made a strong decision to leave school, nor have been particularly encouraged to leave. To some extent they share characteristics with those whom Dwyer (1996a) refers to as 'opportune leavers' or 'circumstantial leavers', but even these description seems to allocate too much of an active decision to them: they are more correctly seen as having a low attachment to education and to have 'drifted out' of schooling.

Dwyer's classification can be mapped onto the original locational matrix, and somewhat simplified to further describe young people encountered in this study:

Out of school	In school
• driven out: discouraged leavers, alienated leavers, circumstantial leavers; • elected out: positive leavers or opportune leavers; • drifted out: on-going low attachment to education, circumstantial leavers.	• would-be leavers; • drifted on: staying on at school for social or unformed reasons (safety, sense of belonging).

In discussing responses to their past and present circumstances, some general characteristics of these groups emerged:

	Out of school	In school
Negative about education	• remain bitter about schooling experiences; • on-going passive commitment to education (express general belief,; perhaps antagonistic to current offerings).	• critical of schooling; • fragile commitment to education: vulnerable to change of personal circumstances; • strong in-school social networks; • staying on at school for social or unformed reasons (safety, sense of belonging).
Positive about education	• bored with out-of-school activities; • positive attachment to general educational goals; • consciously seeking educational alternatives; • oriented to certification; • previous experience of short-term courses etc.	(returners) • ongoing strong positive attachment to educational goals; • place importance on income support linked to education; • place importance on flexible structures, welcoming attitudes, support provision.

These responses then suggest a further framework for understanding the complexities which lead to school leaving and which influence action to encourage returning or retaining students.

Students' attitudes to schooling have, on a variety of measures, been seen to range from commitment to resistance. It is also suggested that the strength with which they hold such attitudes can be seen to be either active or passive. Various terms used in the literature to describe students' attitudes imply a similar typology:

commitment:	active or very strong positive orientation to education;
engagement:	strong positive orientation to education;
connection:	passive or weak positive orientation to education;
disengagement:	passive or weak negative orientation to education;
rejection:	strong negative orientation to education;
resistance:	active or very strong negative orientation to education.

A continuum which describes their orientation towards education and schools can be identified:

Strongly or actively positive about education/ school	Weakly or passively positive about education/ school	Weakly or passively negative about education/ school	Strongly or actively negative about education/ school

Within this framework, decisions about education are made in an overall context of what can be termed students' 'Dimensions of Attachment': the general understanding they have that going to school is what one does, and the recognition they give to obtaining deferred outcomes from their education (work, qualifications etc). These represent the 'glue' that, to varying degrees, keeps students attached to school.

Working with or against this context, are four 'Dimensions of Challenge' that either reinforce commitment to school, or push/pull students away:

- success or otherwise in learning;
- behavioural issues (relations to institutions, authority);
- social issues (including peer relations);
- economic or other situational issues.

Again, each of these can be classified in terms of the strength of their operation within the school and the wider community. The forces that detach from schools and the forces that seek a 'counter-attachment' to 'outside school' are portrayed as acting in opposite directions. It is also recognised that these dimensions interact in complex ways and are subject to change and development; however, they provide a descriptive glimpse of some of the more important factors that are acting upon a young person at a particular time.

The following chart provides an overview of such a scheme. Typical student responses have been included within each cell of the 'dimensions'. These draw on information provided to this study and outlined in the previous sections of this report:

SCHOOL ATTACHMENT SCHEMA:

	Active: ***School Positive*** ***Outside Negative***	***Passive:*** ***School Positive*** ***Outside Negative***	***Passive:*** ***School Negative*** ***Outside Positive***	***Active:*** ***School Negative*** ***Outside Positive***
ATTACHMENT DIMENSIONS				
General understanding	Of course - everybody should go to school	Most people should go to school	School's not for everyone	School's only for brainy people
Deferred outcomes	An education will make sure you get a good job	Education gives you a better chance of a job	Education doesn't help much if there aren't many jobs	Education can't help get you a job
CHALLENGE DIMENSIONS				
Success in learning	I am/was doing very well at my school work	I am/was going OK at my school work	I am/was not much good at my school work	I am/was finding my school work very difficult
Successful roles in the community	I don't have a life outside school	I don't do much outside school	There are some useful things I do outside school	I do important things outside school
Behavioural issues at school	I am/was getting on well with the teachers	I usually keep/kept out of trouble at school	I am/was in trouble at school now and then	I am/was always in trouble with the school
Behavioural issues in the community	I am always in trouble outside school (police etc)	Life's fairly boring away from school	Life's OK away from school - no big hassles	It's fun not to be at school - I do great things
Social/peer issues in school	Most of my friends are/were at school - I am/was getting on well with them	I have/had some friends at school - they are/were OK	I don't/didn't have many friends at school	I am/was often in fights with other students (or bullied etc)
Social/peer issues outside school	I have hassles with other young people outside school	I don't have many friends outside school	I've got a few friends outside school - I get on OK with them	Most of my friends are outside school - I like hanging out with them
Economic and situational issues	I and my family can/could afford to keep me at school	I can/could stay at school as long as it doesn't cost much	It is/was a bit of a struggle to afford to stay at school	It is/was very difficult to afford to stay at school
	I don't need and/or can't get any money outside school	Money's not that important to me at the moment	My finances are a bit tight - I need to earn when I can	I need an income and am earning good money

The general typology of early school leavers can also be mapped onto this schema in order to gain greater understanding of their characteristics. We would expect:

	Active: School Positive	*Passive: School Positive*	*Passive: School Negative*	*Active: School Negative*
ATTACHMENT DIMENSIONS				
General understanding		**DRIFTING LEAVERS**		DISCOURAGED LEAVERS
Deferred outcomes			(OPPORTUNE LEAVERS)	(POSITIVE LEAVERS)
CHALLENGE DIMENSIONS				
Success in learning		**WOULD BE LEAVERS**		**DISCOURAGED LEAVERS**
Successful roles in the community			**OPPORTUNE LEAVERS**	**POSITIVE LEAVERS**
Behavioural issues at school				**ALIENATED LEAVERS**
Behavioural issues in the community				
Social/peer issues in school				
Social/peer issues outside school				
Economic and situational issues				**CIRCUMSTANTIAL LEAVERS**

This schema might also form the basis of a 'tool' for schools and others to use in assessing student needs when they are seeking to return to or remain in education. An understanding of student needs in relation to pressures that tend to detach them from education, is a valuable prelude to the design of programs to meet those needs.

Part 9:

Ways of Responding: Needs, Skills and Work-Ready Outcomes

The objectives of this study are to:

- identify the characteristics and expectations of likely participants; and
- detail the implications these have for providers of programs.

It should be clear from previous sections of this report that there is a wide range of needs and experiences amongst the likely Youth Allowance participants. This complexity makes it difficult to develop a coherent set of indicators or guidelines that would enable us to match likely participants and effective programs. If this is to be done, it is important that, as a first step, we define 'at risk' in terms of unfulfilled or unmet needs, and then begin to explore questions about the types of **skills** that should be provided or developed.

Before doing this, however, a **note of explanation** is necessary about strategies of intervention of this kind.

A major 1994 American review of student at risk programs draws attention to the fact that

> positive effects often 'fade out' when students leave a program, and many programs address only one aspect of a student's difficulties with little attention given to the complex web of social forces that influence a student's opportunities and motivation to learn (Rossi and Montgomery, 1994, ch 9).

To avoid this 'fade out', recent American and Australian intervention strategies propose a more considered approach that establishes a central focus or learning context to ensure more lasting effects - or what is sometimes referred to as an 'ecological' approach to student learning (Hixson and Tinzmann, 1990). The aim is to ensure the positive 'engagement' of students, by defining 'at risk' in terms of unmet or unfulfilled needs, and finding the most appropriate or generative focus of attention around which to build a recovery or re-entry process.

In identifying the characteristics and expectations of likely Youth Allowance participants we must take this into account, by acknowledging three essential components of an appropriate education response:

- the development of core social and relational skills;
- the development of roles of real value for young people;
- the development of appropriate and targeted skills.

In doing so, we also again emphasise that such a response must be based in an assessment of the unmet needs of the young person. This implies flexibility and adaptability of responses, in which educational decisions are located close to and in collaboration with the young person, and implemented within schools, colleges and particular community settings. In order to do so, barriers to the development of local responses need to be removed, and **systemic permission and support** extended to innovative programs. A centralised and mandated 'program' is not an appropriate response to the diversity of needs that the young people surveyed in this study bring to education systems.

Social and Relational Skill Development

At a general level of response, the Australian *Opting Out* study of early school leavers indicates that this type of approach "makes the issue of the students' own active engagement a precondition for any effective strategy of intervention" (Dwyer, 1996: 32). To develop lasting learning skills and to achieve effective academic outcomes, providers need to approach their task "in terms of enabling all their students to perform 'to the best of their own ability'" (ibid: 33). What usually prevents this from taking place?

Here again, there is a convergence of evidence in all the available research. Unfulfilled or undeveloped social and relational needs - and therefore the absence of the concomitant skills - provide the most consistent indicators that a student is likely to be 'at risk'. Studies of truancy (Coventry et al, 1985; Parliament, 1996), early school leaving (Holden and Dwyer, 1992), poor academic performance (Beresford, 1993), loss of motivation (Anderman and Maehr, 1994) and alienation from schooling (Fensham, 1986; ACSA, 1996) point to the centrality of relational factors in under-achievement and eventual failure. Certain key social skills and needs may be unfulfilled because of constrained family circumstances, or harmful peer-group influences, or lack of rapport with teachers, or isolation, or a fear of failure by comparison with their peers but, whatever the cause, the resultant lack of engagement within the learning environment of the school presents a barrier to the development of the other communication, academic and work-related skills that determine successful educational outcomes.

In responding to the needs of the Youth Allowance participants, therefore, a necessary starting point must be the identification of the particular **social skills** of each participant that are under-developed and how this has affected the range of other skills that are needed.

Roles of Value

The young people interviewed within this study commonly indicate a low attachment to the 'deferred outcomes' of their education. That is, they don't see (especially in contrast to other 'detaching' or competing factors) that continued education will, one day, deliver valuable outcomes for them. Nor, in general, do they recognise that there are more immediate outcomes of value (for example, increased understandings, joy in learning) being provided for them. In fact, many complain of quite the opposite: that their education is passive rather than active, 'academic' rather than 'hands-on', remote in its application and so on.

These descriptors are particularly true for young people currently out of school, for whom (sometimes illegal) social and economic roles may deliver immediate outcomes, identity, and esteem.

Coleman (1972, pp 5-8) summarised such concerns as:

> The student role of young persons has become enlarged to the point where that role constitutes the major portion of their youth. But the student role is not a role of taking action and experiencing consequences... It is a relatively passive role, always in preparation for action, but never acting... The consequences of the expansion of the student role, and the action poverty it implies for the young, has been an increased restiveness among the young. They are shielded

> from responsibility, and they become irresponsible; they are held in a dependent status, and they come to act as dependents; they are kept away from productive work, and they become unproductive.

There is a need to ensure that educational programs and school experiences develop roles of immediate value for young people. It is important that the young people who are the subject of this study can see the point of staying in or returning to school in terms of roles of value for them that go beyond the classroom. When they call for an increased relevance of schooling (even in face of concerted attempts to make curriculum relevant), they are calling for experiences in education that connect with 'authentic outcomes'.

There has been substantial documentation of such programs within the 'student participation' and 'authentic assessment' literature and such approaches have been endorsed in a range of recent reports (ACSA, 1996; Cumming, 1997; Dwyer, 1996; Holdsworth, 1997).

Needs Characteristics and Skill Expectations

Central to the outcomes expected from the Youth Allowance initiative is a professed policy commitment to 're-engage' those currently outside the institutional frameworks of either employment or education. The policy goal is that by providing a point of re-entry for them into 'full-time study or training' they will, as a consequence, be enabled to develop the skills needed to become effective participants in the flexible workforce of the future. Their full-time educational participation is defined in policy terms as a necessary *prelude* to preparedness for entry into the workforce.

The educational question therefore is quite direct. How can this initiative be constructed to ensure that its participants emerge at the end of the process as genuinely **work-ready**? This can best be answered in terms of the *skills* that are seen as crucial for the contemporary workforce.

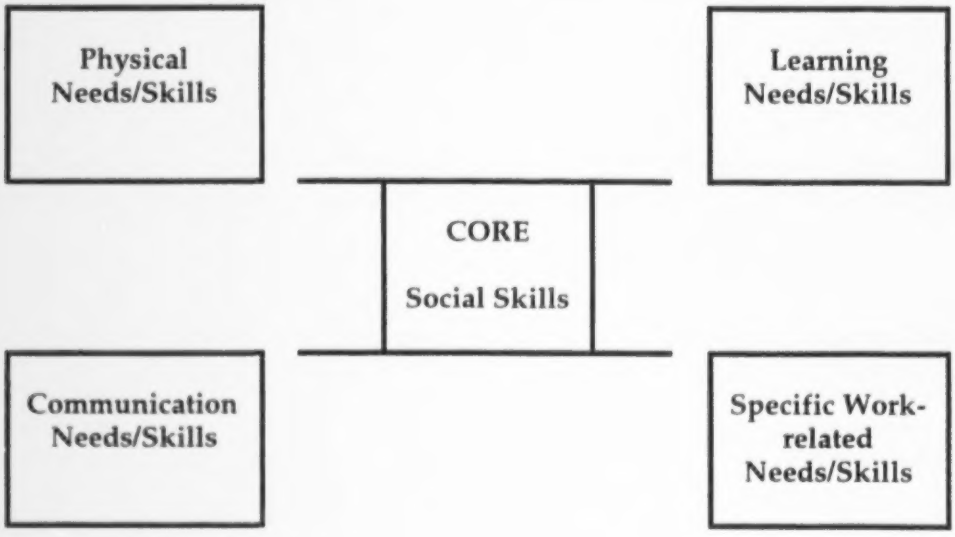
Since the mid-eighties the business community has left no doubt in its contributions to numerous government inquiries about what those skills are likely to be (Kirby, 1985; Finn, 1991; Mayer, 1992). The consistent advice from employer groups indicates that what is needed for the future is a set of broad and flexible skills that would enable Australian industry to respond to changing policies and markets within the world economy. The importance of viewing 'work-related' attributes in a broad and flexible fashion was given strong support from the leading business organisations in a submission for the Finn Report, which emphasised competencies that would give school-leavers the necessary flexibility to turn their hand to a range of different tasks and responsibilities rather than confine them to a narrowly-defined occupational role.

> In a joint paper to this review, six leading employer organisations argued that the principle role of schools should be to provide students not so much with narrow, occupation-specific skills but rather with:
>
> - strong levels of competence in literacy and numeracy;
> - analytical thinking and problem solving abilities;
> - creative and expressive talents; and
> - personal qualities of responsibility, initiative, creativity, adaptability, cooperativeness and self confidence (Finn, 1991: 115-6).

The recent survey from DEETYA regarding employer assessments of apprenticeship applicants points in the same direction and is highly critical of the lack of suitable skill development, which suggests that the employer definitions and expectations might raise some hard questions about current schooling practices. Another industry report (McLeish, 1997) also expressed some doubt on the part of the business representatives about 'current school-based assessments' (p 4) regarding the suitability of applicants, and instead they looked for 'evidence of extra curricula and work related experience as a more reliable indicator' (p 5).

Thus there is an element of challenge to educational practitioners in this. It should be obvious from previous sections of this Report that any worthwhile strategies of intervention or re-engagement will need to come to terms with the *negative* aspects of 'risk' and alienation. There is no point in denying that many of the likely Youth Allowance participants will come from that 'sizeable group' for whom past schooling has been 'at best unhelpful' (Senate Committee, 1992, pp 37-8). At the same time, in taking account of these negative factors, it is equally important to devise programs that do 'effectively improve the experience and success of young Australians within the settings of institutionalised learning' (Dwyer, 1996, p 47).

In response to this educational challenge, however, it should be noted that there is a surprising convergence between the research findings on the needs of those 'at risk' and the types of flexible competencies that are being emphasised within the business community. Developing a skills-based program which first builds up and then builds on the participants' social competencies fortunately makes good sense on both educational and industrial grounds - despite the negative factors that need to be overcome. Thus, while it is not the responsibility of this Report to spell out in any detail the elements of Youth Allowance programs of study, the central purpose of such programs is self-evident: the achievement of the necessary skill levels in the participants for them to be 'work-ready'. On the basis of the evidence, this points to the establishment of a variety of Core Skills/Specific Needs programs which would make the development of effective social skills the centre-piece and then lead on to the fulfilment of a range of more specific needs. This would mean relating the Social Skills 'core' to four other general areas of 'specific needs' as indicated below.



There is of course an important proviso in all this: there needs to be a *matching* of programs and the particular participants. While we would assume that the particular providers would be able to match the participants to specific programs in response to these different kinds of needs at a *general* programmatic level, such program delivery is unlikely to achieve effective 're-engagement' unless a conscious effort is made to identify the *particular levels or degrees of need* in the different participants. It would be essential to construct a number of different curriculum packages with one, for example, placing greater emphasis on the physical and communication needs, another built around the learning needs, and one more directed towards those participants fairly proficient in the other areas but with underdeveloped work-related skills. Flexibility of delivery should be central to educational as well as to industrial practice.

Areas Suggested for Specific Responses

The main focus of this Report has been to 'identify the characteristics and expectations of likely participants'. A subordinate aim has been to 'detail the implications these have for providers of programs'. Already in this section we have outlined what we judge to be the major implications at the programmatic level, but some further indication of areas of response merit some mention here.

There are, in our view, four critical areas:

1. the ways in which young people are treated;
2. the nature of the courses on offer;
3. institutional flexibility in delivery of courses;
4. the support structure - especially for those with most negative experiences - in providing both initial and on-going support

We assume that other reports in this series of studies will also provide extensive discussion of these areas of response. We also assume that they will provide varying perspectives on the range of responses that have occurred in the past, that are already available, and the shape they are likely to take in response to the introduction of the Youth Allowance.

We would urge, however, that the issue of matching responses to a diversity of needs must remain central to any effective delivery of programs. For this reason, we believe that both the 'Core/Skills' Program design presented in this part of our Report combined with the 'School Attachment Schema' presented earlier at the end of Part 8 offer the kinds of 'reality test' that needs to inform effective practice.

We noted earlier in this report that the issue of retaining and returning students are not new. Neither are the proposed responses new to Victorian education; they draw on past successes in senior curriculum such as the STC and T12 courses, on the continued experience of small community/alternative schools, and on a wealth of school-based curriculum development. These initiatives have been substantially documented and recognised as, for example, contributing to higher than national average retention rates, and to positive outcomes for students. The enthusiasm for and commitment to such approaches continues to exist within schools and colleges.

The implementation of appropriate educational responses to the changes to the Youth Allowance requires initiatives from both education systems and specific schools and colleges. Drawing upon the information provided to this study and the discussion in this report, we wish to put forward the following summary of what we believe those responses should contact:

Summary:

The Nature of Responses Required at the System Level

- Formal arrangements need to be established which **reward** schools and colleges for retaining students and, in particular, for successfully re-enrolling students. Such arrangements might include financial bonuses for course development, provision of professional development, increased staffing allocations and so on.
- A case management approach (perhaps located within school clusters and in association with Centrelink offices, and possibly operating through the placement of youth workers in schools or in association with other programs such as the School Focused Youth Service) needs to be centrally established; this approach would play a 'brokerage' or 'advocacy' role and aim to match individual students to existing and emerging options, to work with them in appropriate placements, and to continue to offer support and guidance.
- Staffing formulae for schools and units undertaking to accept and retain difficult students and to work with returning students need to recognise the particular personnel needs of curriculum development and delivery, and of providing support for students beyond the classroom. In particular, staffing formulae need to acknowledge the implications of flexible timetabling and attendance requirements.
- Impediments to the operation of a more flexible range of educational options need to be removed. In particular, age restrictions on enrolment in schools and in TAFE, and the non-recognition and non-funding of alternative courses (outside the VCE) at senior levels have been identified as serious constraints to schools and colleges in developing appropriate responses that would enable students to remain at or return to education.
- Flexible development of courses and approaches at individual school and college level needs to be supported. A mandated centralised approach is inappropriate; central permission, encouragement and support for appropriate innovative approaches is essential.
- The Victorian education system has a substantial and documented history of development of appropriate courses and approaches. These include such school-based senior courses as STC, T12 and so on. It is imperative that current initiatives learn from the successes of these approaches and build upon them.

Summary:

The Nature of Responses Required at the School/College Level

- Schools and Colleges need, first and foremost, to exhibit a strong commitment to and support for retainers/returners. This includes the establishment of an appropriate school ethos through:
  - the form of initial welcome to the school/college;
  - determination of individual needs;
  - appropriate physical and social facilities eg in schools: separate year 11/12 room, flexible uniform policy;
  - on-going support and tracking of needs/skills;
  - creation of curriculum and governance roles of value for students.
- Teachers and other school/college personnel need school support for the development of appropriate curriculum and social roles through professional development, support for the documentation of student needs and approaches, and support for linkages with community agencies.
- An increased range of educational options needs to be established that enable students to achieve success. Some of these options need to be community-based and located away from both the scene and the approach of past 'failures'. Such options would include:
  - links to the CGEA;
  - increased access to the TAFE and ACE sectors;
  - 'authentic' learning, work and assessment;
  - pathways to apprenticeships and traineeships, including developments within VET in Schools, New Apprenticeships and so on;
  - recognition of these as alternative school settings within the Department of Education.

  (While it goes beyond the brief of this study, one alternative educational setting identified during the research has a small number of students and staff, collects students from homes, works with the entire family, follows students up with youth worker support on return to 'mainstream' schools or other options, caters for students who are struggling in the 'mainstream', and plans to return them to mainstream options after an intensive 20 week vocationally oriented program. Other locally developed options would necessarily have different characteristics.)
- An increased range of on-campus alternative approaches need to be developed at the school or college level. These might involve the establishment of appropriate school groupings (eg sub-schooling),

but some might also be appropriately applied across the whole school. These approaches would be characterised by:

- negotiation of individual and group programs between students and teachers;
- development of individual programs matched to student needs;
- real and valued outcomes of learning including authentic work and assessment;
- diversity in program offerings including specific attention to creative and hands-on approaches;
- flexible delivery of courses, particularly in relation to time commitments (eg shorter blocks of work), innovative mixes of school and work;
- inclusion of a variety of approaches to the delivery of VET in schools;
- additional literacy/numeracy skills;
- extra direct tutorial support;
- social and relational skill development, including conflict resolution, negotiation skills, peer support and mediation programs;
- accreditation of school-based learning alongside the VCE; articulation of these courses to further education, training and work through specific instance negotiation.

Part 10:

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Appendices:

Appendix 1.

Batten, M and Russell, J (1995) **Students at Risk - A Review of Australian Literature 1980-1994**, ACER, Melbourne, p 51

The Individual

Psychosocial factors
- Self-esteem
- Motivation
- Cognitive constructs
- Socially limited personality

Physical factors
- Health, illness and disability

Behavioural factors
- Disruptive behaviour
- Passivity
- Pregnancy/motherhood
- Young offenders
- Drug use/substance abuse
- Academic performance

The family

Family structure
- Fragmented and reconstituted family structures
- Family size

Family functioning
- Disturbed parent/child relationships
- Conflict
- Abuse
- Modelling
- Mobility

Family socio-economic context
- Income
- Education

Separation from family
- Homelessness
- Wards of state

The school

School organisation
- Organisational policies and practices
- Discipline
- School leaving and re-entry

Curriculum
- Content
- Decision-making
- Teaching-learning strategies
- Assessment

School climate
- Teacher/student relationships
- Peer relationships
- School counsellors/psychologists
- Student participation
- School/home relationships
- Staff professional development

Societal factors

- Poverty

Group differences

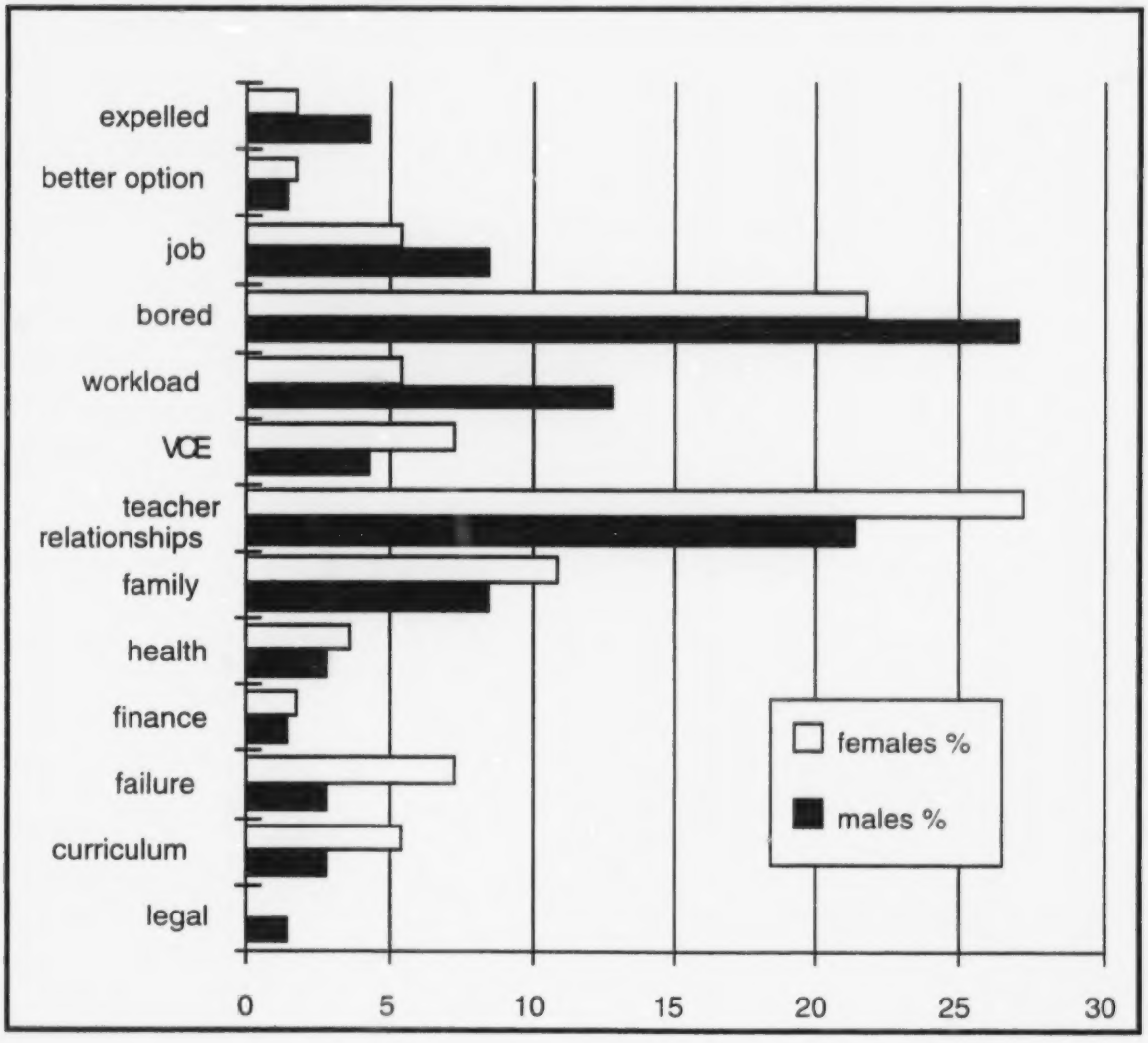
- Gender
- Ethnicity:
  - Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander
  - NESB
- Socioeconomic status
- Geographical location

Figure 3 Summary of risk factors discussed in the report

Appendix 2.

Holden, E and Dwyer, P (1992) **Making the Break- Leaving School Early**, Working Paper No. 8 in the Disaffiliated Early School Leavers Study, Youth Research Centre, Melbourne, p 11

Table 7 - Reasons for Leaving



Appendix 3.

Batten, M and Russell, J (1995) **Students at Risk - A Review of Australian Literature 1980-1994**, ACER, Melbourne, p 31

General areas of change	Specific examples
Curriculum	More practical, job-oriented subjects; more life skills and personal development orientation; more choice, less compulsion, fewer prerequisites; altered duration; more sporting and recreational subjects.
Teaching-learning processes	More independent and individualised work; more student-centred work; more tutorial assistance; more hands-on, activity-based, experiential learning experiences; more class discussions; less homework; more excursions and camps.
Assessment and credentialling	Fewer exams; more progressive assessment; more feedback; more criterion-references assessment; more transfer of credit from institutions; less competition; higher status to those who graduate from secondary school; more broadly defined university entrance requirements.
Relationships and climate	More caring and supportive; more friendly, relaxed and informal; more counselling and guidance; more pastoral assistance; more opportunities for students and teachers to socialise; mentoring programs.
Discipline and control	Fewer/different rules; more democracy; more student representation; more freedom for students; stricter/more lenient enforcement; tighter record keeping.
School organisation and administration	Smaller school and class sizes; divisions into 'mini-schools'; separate school/campus for senior students; altered length or timing of the school day; more flexible timetable; vertical grouping of students; more options for part-time study and return-to-study.
Environment and resources	Improved building and grounds; improved teaching spaces and resources; improved sporting and recreational facilities and equipment.
External links	More/altered work experience; more links with TAFE colleges; more contact with universities; more parental and community involvement in school administration and instruction; more information to parents and the community.
Staffing	More teachers, counsellors and remedial teachers; more support staff; more opportunities for retraining in different/broader/more currently relevant subjects; more relief staff to provide time for planning and evaluation; more opportunities for reduction of teacher stress; changed teacher attitudes to retention; increased teacher expectations.

Figure 1 **Types of intervention aimed at increasing student retention (Bradley, 1992)**

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Appendix 4:

Use of the School Attachment Schema - Questionnaire

Here are ten questions about school and your life generally. After each question, there are some comments from students. Pick the **one** comment in each question that is closest to what you think:

1. **Should people go to school?**

   a) Of course - everybody should go to school
   b) Most people should go to school
   c) School's not for everyone
   d) School's only for brainy people

2. **What about getting qualified for a job?**

   a) An education will make sure you get a good job
   b) Education gives you a better chance of a job
   c) Education doesn't help much if there aren't many jobs
   d) Education can't help get you a job

3. **How well are you doing/did you do at school?**

   a) I am/was doing very well at my school work
   b) I am/was going OK at my school work
   c) I am/was not much good at my school work
   d) I am/was finding my school work very difficult

4. **What do you do outside school?**

   a) I don't have a life outside school
   b) I don't do much outside school
   c) There are some useful things I do outside school
   d) I do important things outside school

5. **What is/was your behaviour like at school?**

   a) I am/was getting on well with the teachers
   b) I usually keep/kept out of trouble at school
   c) I am/was in trouble at school now and then
   d) I am/was always in trouble with the school

6. **What is your behaviour like away from school?**

   a) I am always in trouble outside school (police etc)
   b) Life's fairly boring away from school
   c) Life's OK away from school - no big hassles
   d) It's fun not to be at school - I do great things

7. **How about friends at school?**

   a) Most of my friends are/were at school - I am/was getting on well with them
   b) I have/had some friends at school - they are/were OK
   c) I don't/didn't have many friends at school
   d) I am/was often in fights with other students (or bullied etc)

8. How about friends outside school?

a) I have hassles with other young people outside school
b) I don't have many friends outside school
c) I've got a few friends outside school - I get on OK with them
d) Most of my friends are outside school - I like hanging out with them

9. Is/was money a problem at school?

a) I and my family can/could afford to keep me at school
b) I can/could stay at school as long as it doesn't cost much
c) It is/was a bit of a struggle to afford to stay at school
d) It is/was very difficult to afford to stay at school

10. How important is earning money?

a) I don't need and/or can't get any money outside school
b) Money's not that important to me at the moment
c) My finances are a bit tight - I need to earn when I can
d) I need an income and am earning good money

Youth Research Centre

The Youth Research Centre is located within the Faculty of Education at The University of Melbourne. It was established in 1988 in response to a recognised need by the youth affairs sector for relevant and up to date research on the issues facing young people today.

The aims of the YRC are to:

- conduct relevant, coherent and reliable research on young people in Australia, with a state, national and international focus;
- assist with the development of policy and the implementation of initiatives based on research findings;
- develop strong links with the youth affairs sector, with particular attention to helping to identify and address the sector's research needs;
- facilitate communication between educators, researchers, policy makers and youth workers;
- support the research activities of university staff and post-graduate students who have a specific interest in youth affairs; and,
- enhance the professional development of staff and students by assisting them to be informed about the broader context of young people's lives.

Youth Research Centre Activities

The YRC has particular expertise in research on education, transition pathways, social justice, gender equity and employment issues as they affect young people.

The main YRC activities are:

- undertaking research and publishing the outcomes in a manner accessible to policy makers and the youth sector;
- providing information and policy advice to governments and other organisations;
- assisting and encouraging individuals or groups who work with young people.

YRC activities involve:

- undertaking small projects for groups lacking the capacity or opportunity to do so themselves;
- providing a base for post-graduate students wishing to undertake Masters or PhD research on topics related to young people and the youth sector;
- enabling academics to participate in established YRC projects, and/or undertake their own research on youth related issues;
- maintaining a youth sector resource library;
- publishing series of Working Papers and Research Reports;
- conducting public seminars and conferences on a variety of issues relevant to those working in the youth sector.

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